

How Sad, How Lovely

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How Sad, How Lovely

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Summary

“Most people do not even remember me when that class is over, but you are very unusual.”
Ivan’s eyes catch the light. “You look at me like you’re *starving*.”

—

Or, the story of how Alfred falls in love with the nude model at his art school.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Happy (belated) birthday, Vance! I started this “oneshot” before I even knew your birthday was nearby and then it got longer... and longer.

Alfred’s craving candy. But since he can’t have it, he picks out a bag of M&Ms or Skittles or Snickers, reads the nutrition label at the back and returns it to the self. He’s been at this for a while now.

“This is getting depressing,” Matthew sighs from the cashier counter. “Are you going to buy something or not?”

“You know I can’t,” Al frowns, eyeing over the array of other junk food favorites. Chips. Cookies. Donut holes. His stomach growls, and he places a hand over it with a sigh. “It was so much easier at fat camp. Drawing all day has me stressed the hell out.”

“Then eat something. I don’t understand why you went to that place anyway. You were fine before,” Matthew says, pursing his lips a little.

They’ve had this conversation many times since summer ended, but Alfred’s still glad he went. He didn’t want to start college looking like the loser he was in high school. Sure, taking off his braces helped, but he was still fat with a binge-eating problem.

Fortunately, their parents were all too happy to pay for Alfred’s transformation. It was brutal working out all day and eating nothing but bland food like tofu ice cream, but he doesn’t regret it. At least, now he looks normal. His mom and dad praised his weight loss. The comments about his former appearance stopped. He can share clothes with Matthew again. He doesn’t feel self-conscious walking around campus.

Well, he still does, but not as much as he used to.

“I’m just going to get the usual,” Alfred mumbles, stalking off to the refrigerator section. He picks out a sugar-free Red Bull and some protein bar. He doesn’t need much for sitting around all day. It’s enough to tide him through a couple more hours of studio time.

When he returns to the cash register, Matthew is busy checking out another student. His blond hair has grown to shoulder length, but he pulls it off naturally. Even from where Alfred’s standing he can tell that the girl is probably already developing a crush on him. Her cheeks are turning pink with all of Matthew’s awkward small talk about her purchases.

Alfred cringes, because he doesn’t understand why Matthew’s joking about salad of all things. But the girl laughs, because that’s part of his charm.

Unlike Alfred, Matthew blossomed in college. Somehow, his reserved yet sassy personality never really stood out in high school, and it didn't help that he was always trying to stay out of the spotlight because of his acne. But since his skin cleared up, he makes more of an effort to socialize and because they both go to a nerdy art school, Matthew's tall, lanky figure is basically the equivalent of a football player. He's popular.

Alfred...is pretty much the same. He always has a pretty easy time making friends and college is no different in that way. The only difference is that he's thinner now. Somehow, Alfred thought that change would have led to a lot more than the reality. That is: being able to wear more clothes but also being hungry as hell, and he's still not dating anyone.

"Have a good day!" Matthew tells the customer, flashing an easy smile.

Alfred rolls up to the counter and drops his purchases. "She was cute. Do you know her?"

"Why would I know her?" Matthew raises a brow.

Alfred shrugs. "Well, you're always talking to girls. And she seemed to like you a lot."

"My major is outnumbered by girls," Matthew laughs. "But I also just find them easier to talk to. You should try it sometime, Al. Maybe you'll find a girlfriend that way."

Alfred scoffs. "I don't care about that."

"Oh, right. Sorry, you want a boyfriend."

"I don't care about that either!" Alfred says quickly, but his voice cracks and his smile feels too forced. His desperation is painfully obvious.

Matthew rolls his eyes. "Well, anyway. If that's all, it'll be the usual nine dollars and—"

"Oh, wait. I wanted something else," Alfred interrupts, peering over Matthew's shoulder curiously. He sees different medicine boxes but not what he needs. "Do you sell cigarettes here?"

Matthew's brows rise to his hairline. "You think the school food mart sells cigarettes? What kind of question is that? Of course, not. Why the hell do you want cigarettes anyway?"

"Well, it's..." Alfred smiles a little shyly, "It's kind of stupid, but there are these two foreign students I see outside the illustration building and I can't figure out a way to talk to them. They're always on smoke breaks though, so I figure maybe if I have a reason to join them... y'know?" Saying the plan out loud makes it sound even dumber, but Alfred's seriously out of ideas on how to approach these two. Or rather, one in particular.

"And you can't just talk to them?" Matthew demands impatiently.

"I don't even know what department they're in! All they do is sit at the picnic table, smoke cigarettes, and speak European," Alfred complains, tossing his head back. He's definitely tried to approach them—at least to hear their names. But when he gets close the short one

throws him an unnerving glare and the tall one smiles and Alfred doesn't know which is worse. "I don't think they even know English."

"Al, they're attending an English-speaking school. Of course, they speak English. At least somewhat." Matthew shakes his head. He sees another customer approach and nods to Alfred. "Hurry up and pay. My shift is done in ten minutes. We can talk more afterward."

Alfred slaps his student ID card down, already stocked with his budget for the semester. After Matthew hands it back and slides a plastic bag over, Alfred takes it and waits outside on the bench. A few gulps of the energy drink fills his empty stomach, and he doesn't feel as cranky as before. It does spark the jitters though. In his legs and his heart.

Eventually, Matthew exits the store still wearing his uniform shirt. He sets his backpack down beside the bench and sits next to Alfred, a plastic water bottle in his hand.

"So, which students are you talking about?" Matthew asks.

"I don't know their names," Alfred admits. He presses his thumb to his chin and thinks. "But I think one of them might be called Simon?"

"That's a dumb name."

"Well, I don't know for sure," Alfred continues, suddenly defensive of the taller guy (whatever his name is). "I guess I'll just have to go to a gas station or something and buy cigarettes then. Not really sure what I'll ask for though."

"Dad still smokes Camel Blues, I think. You can try that." Matthew blinks and then sighs loudly. "Shit. Why am I even indulging you? This is such a stupid reason to buy cigarettes. Just say hi to them. I don't understand why I even have to give you this advice. You're the one who is usually telling me this."

"Well, because—" Alfred bites his lip. "I mean, I've tried...kinda? But it's like I can't really remember how to talk when I see this guy. So I figured maybe if we're both smoking then there's that icebreaker and maybe, y'know, maybe, uh—"

"Oh, okay. I get it now. You have a crush." Matthew turns one palm up. "Well, then that's a totally normal reason to buy cigarettes."

"It is?" Alfred leans forward curiously. "Wait, have you done this before?"

"I was being sarcastic. Why are you looking at me like that?" Matthew's shoulders hunch defensively.

But Alfred sees the blush spreading over his brother's face clear as day. "Wow, you're totally lying. Holy shit." Alfred breaks out in a grin. "Who is it? C'mon, you gotta let me know. I never would have guessed you'd be a smoker."

"I'm *not*," Matthew shoots back hotly. His fingers crunch the water bottle in his hands. "But I've been to a few house parties with my classmates and yeah, there was a girl who was smoking and when a hot girl offers you a cigarette you don't exactly say no."

“You don’t?”

“Well, I wasn’t about to try!”

“Man, that’s so pathetic.” Alfred laughs.

Matthew throws him a glare. “Sure, and like what you’re plotting is any less pathetic. You’re an idiot, Al. Why do you even want to talk to this guy?”

Alfred’s gaze slides away. “I dunno. He seems interesting, I guess. Kinda different than everyone else. We did interact once, but it was,” Alfred chews the inside of his cheek, “It was kind of embarrassing.”

“Oh, so you have talked to him before. Then, why the hell are you even complaining?”

“We didn’t talk!” Alfred snaps. “It was more like—I was running to my first critique since I was really late. And I wasn’t watching where I was going and I like full-on *body slammed* into the guy. Seriously. It felt like I ran into a wall. But he was the only one knocked over. And then my drawings were flying everywhere and I was like half-cursing and half apologizing to the guy.”

“What a beautiful meet-cute.”

“Shut up,” Alfred flushes, balling one hand over his knee. “I felt *so* bad. But he didn’t really seem to mind. I honestly couldn’t tell what he was thinking. I don’t even think he said anything. He just helped me pick up the drawings and started looking them over.”

Matthew looks at him expectantly. “...And?”

“And then he fucking laughed! I was humiliated!”

“Al, you draw comics! Isn’t that a compliment?” Matthew chuckles.

“I don’t draw *funny* comics—which you’d know if you were reading what I show you,” Alfred tells him. “It’s about a superhero who has to choose between saving his twin brother and the planet ... I mean he saw the sketch of the hero holding his dead brother in his arms. It’s not funny. Like not at all. It’s supposed to be—I mean, it *is* cool.”

"Am I supposed to just ignore the fact you're killing off the twin brother and not read any meaning into that?"

"Dude, it's a *story*."

Matthew sighs. “And that’s why you’re in love with him? Because your art made him laugh?”

“Okay, I am *not* in love with him,” Alfred laughs awkwardly, taking another sip of his energy drink. His knee won’t stop bouncing. “I didn’t even say it was a crush. You did. I just...yeah it was an embarrassing way to meet but I can’t stop thinking about him. He’s so weird. I mean, he’s like six foot four, at least. He’s either wearing clothes covered in paint or a

bathrobe. He reeks of cigarettes, and the only thing I've ever seen him eat in the cafeteria is cheese fries!"

"Wow, sounds dreamy." Matthew rolls his eyes, but his smile is amused.

Alfred crushes the empty can in his hand. "Matt, for real. I'm being serious here. I either figure out a way to talk to this guy or I'm going to lose my mind."

"Well, when you put it like that, clearly cigarettes are the only solution."

Alfred points his finger at him. "I know you're making fun of me. But that is exactly what I'm going to do." He grabs his protein bar and rises from the bench, ready to head back to the studio.

Matthew shouts after him. "Might want to practice first! You're not going to look very cool hacking your lungs out on your first cigarette!"

Alfred smokes his first cigarette in the parking lot of the grocery store after finishing up school. Immediately, his lungs rebel and he releases a string of coughs, just like Matthew predicted.

The taste is awful. It feels weird to hold it between his fingers like that; far too small and delicate compared to a pencil or pen. Is he supposed to hold it in his left or right? Well, left feels marginally better.

Alfred has this paranoia that everyone is staring at him even though he's tucked away in the corner. He doesn't think he looks nearly as sophisticated as the old Hollywood actors. Or as natural as the tall student Alfred is trying to impress.

Wait, no. Not impress. Just talk to.

After many drags, Alfred is finally able to finish the cigarette. He feels pretty proud of himself, even if he hated every moment. It stifles his appetite a bit too, which is a plus, because he is always so hungry.

When Alfred returns to the apartment, Matthew cringes from the smell. But then gets up from the couch and steals a cigarette from the pack.

"Well, since you bought them I might as well talk to that girl again," Matthew excuses, peering out the window. "She usually smokes nearby after dinner."

"Who is she anyway?" Alfred asks, picking up the control of PlayStation.

"I'm not telling you that until you figure out who Simon is."

Alfred's stomach flips. "I doubt that's really his name. It's just what I heard. Which wasn't easy to make out in whatever language they're speaking."

"Sure, whatever," Matthew laughs. "Because they were speaking 'European', right?"

Alfred ignores him for his video game.

The next day, Alfred smokes another cigarette while he and Matthew walk together to campus. He still coughs the first time, but it's not as bad after that. He doesn't like it, but he can tolerate it.

"This is so weird, Al," Matthew comments, eyeing him strangely. "You don't do this sort of thing. You're the good kid. Smart. Friendly. Kind of a geek. Going to fat camp was already bizarre, but seeing you smoke cigarettes..."

"Okay, going to fat camp was necessary. Not just because of how I looked. I was freaking unhealthy," Alfred says between drags. At least smoking gave him something to do with his hands. "I mean, even Dad agreed. Mom was all for it too."

"Because they're assholes," Matthew replies dryly. Seeing Alfred's shocked expression, he adds, "Yeah, I love them. But they see us as mini versions of themselves. So the weird maple leaf-shaped birthmark I used to have on my cheek? Go get laser treatment. Your weight—off to fat camp. They want to help, I guess. But they're assholes about it."

"I cannot believe you just said that. I told you, fat camp was my idea! I wanted to change."

"Sure, it was. After mom left brochures all over the house and made you get on the scale before breakfast each morning."

Alfred doesn't really know what to say, so back to smoking he goes.

Matthew continues staring at him. "Well, I will say this. When you smoke, you do look less like a cartoonist and more like an artist."

"Oh, really?" Alfred perks up, delighted. He adjusts his glasses. "Does it make me look cooler?"

"Uh, as cool as you can look, I guess." Matthew gives him a once-over. "You still look pretty nerdy, otherwise. Maybe it's your belt or something. And obviously, the glasses don't help. You should get contacts like me."

"I'm not taking fashion advice to you no matter how many girls you hang out with," Alfred remarks sassily. He's just happy that Matthew used the word cool to describe him.

"Well, I guess I'll see you later. Good luck with your 'second meet-awful', I guess," Matthew laughs, putting the description in air quotes. After a wave, he veers off the path in the direction of the journalism building.

Alfred has to walk further to get to the arts campus. Almost twenty minutes, in fact. But he doesn't mind. He always enjoys plugging in his headphones and listening to music during his commute.

As he enters the other side of the college, backpack heavy on his shoulders and headphones still in his ears, he sees a familiar plume of smoke coming from the doors to the illustration building. Alfred draws his lower lip between his teeth, steeling his resolve. When he pats

down his pockets the pack of cigarettes is right there, and a lighter too. Maybe... if that guy is there, Alfred will try now, before class.

He walks down the path until he can see the area of picnic benches. Perched on the tabletop of one of them is the shorter foreign student, wildly gesticulating with his hands. His fingers are covered in rings of varying sizes. His grin is sharp and his hair is a pale silver, perhaps dyed that way. Alfred may not have an eye for fashion, but he knows enough to identify skinny European pants and flat sneakers.

Alfred's not really interested in getting to know this guy, whatever his deal is. But the larger man is also there, sitting on the bench, elbows bent as he rolls a cigarette in his pale fingers. He's smiling just the same as he did at Alfred that day. With large, blue-purple eyes that glance at his friend with mild curiosity or amusement or some other light emotion.

Now, that Matthew planted the whole idea of crush in Alfred's brain, he can't seem to forget the word as he stares at this man. Because, as Alfred looks at him, he realizes that this guy is actually startling handsome. In kind of a unique way that you don't often see.

There is a flash of red tongue as the man licks over the cigarette paper once before sealing it and bringing the filter to his lips. His lighter has a sunflower on it,

Oh, now's my chance, Alfred thinks. He's just about to light a cigarette, so Alfred can naturally join them.

But his shoes stop mid stride when he realizes that this man is wearing the bathrobe today. One pale, bare leg visible as he crosses it over the other. The halo of white-blond body hair visible in the crisp Autumn light. Even the collar of the bathrobe seems loosely closed, and Alfred makes out the expanse of a large chest underneath. And a flash of pink nipple.

Holy shit.

With hot ears, Alfred makes an aborted move and continues his march toward the entrance to the building. He doesn't check if those two notice his weird movement. Alfred just continues forward. He makes up his mind to talk to this guy as soon as he's in fucking normal clothes again.

What the hell is his deal anyway?

"Alfred, have you seen my eraser?" asks Kiku.

At the sound of his name, Alfred's head pops up from his light table, vision blurry even with his glasses on. "Uh," he looks down and around. "I don't think I have. I've been here for a bit. But you can take one of mine—here." Alfred reaches across his desk for his pencil bag and slides it to Kiku's side.

They're neighbors in the studio, which has been the best of luck as far as Alfred's concerned. He and Kiku are both into the comics world of illustration so they can bounce ideas off each other all the time before critiques.

Kiku accepts the eraser easily enough, but his eyes flit to Alfred's desk curiously. "Did I see a pack of cigarettes behind your folder?"

"What?" Alfred turns dumbly to the crumpled pack peaking out from tower of papers. He put it there haphazardly because it was bothering him in his pocket. "Oh, yeah. Uh..."

"Tough week?" Kiku asks sympathetically, brushing off eraser flakes from his page. "I had a tough time quitting smoking as well."

Kiku *smokes*? Alfred can't even picture it. He seems so clean-cut. "Right," Alfred agrees slowly, taking a break to clean his glasses with the sleeve of his shirt. "Just stressed about my first draft, I guess."

"Al, you spend half of your life in this studio. I should know because I'm here as often as you are. If I'm on pace, that means you are too," Kiku says determinedly.

And somehow, his matter-of-factness does actually ease Alfred's nerves.

"But since you have some cigs, why don't we take a break together?"

Alfred watches Kiku stand up with wide eyes. "Dude, wait. Didn't you say you quit?"

"Second-hand smoking is good enough," Kiku shrugs. "Sometimes I just miss being around it. You get it, right?"

Alfred slowly scoots out from his seat as he searches for an appropriate lie. "Yeah, totally. Uh, let's head out then. I need to stretch my legs anyway."

With cigarettes and a lighter back in his pocket, Alfred heads out of the studio with Kiku. They exit the illustration building and Alfred hesitantly leads the way to the picnic benches where he sees the foreign students smoke.

Alfred's hyperaware of how he lights his cigarette with Kiku half-watching him while scrolling on his phone. Alfred's not even sure if he's doing it right, but somehow he manages a flame and exhales the first puff of nicotine. He doesn't even cough.

"Man, that smells good," Kiku sighs dreamily.

Seriously? Alfred's pretty sure it smells awful, but he's too desperate to talk to this foreign guy to care. Rather than replying, he ashes his cigarette off the side of the table.

"Oh, by the way," Kiku sits up in his seat. "Did you sign up for the life drawing class yet? I would like to go to the same session as you."

Alfred shakes his head. "Nah, I haven't done anything. Haven't even thought of it, to be honest." All Alfred thinks about is his comic. That, and the foreign student.

Kiku chuckles and continues typing on his phone. "I kind of figured that. Can I sign you up for the same time slot as me then?"

“Go for it.”

Kiku slides over his phone so Alfred can put in his student information. Then, Kiku takes the phone back and does the rest.

“I’ve never been to a life drawing class before, y’know,” Alfred vocalizes between breaths of smoke. “It must be weird, right? What’s it like? They’re not actually naked, are they?”

Not only does Kiku lower his phone, but he also raises a brow. “Of course they are. It’s *life* drawing. One of the oldest artistic learning traditions. How else are you going to learn anatomy?”

Alfred coughs—from embarrassment, not the smoke—and feels heat rise up his neck. “Oh, okay. Um, shit,” he forces a laugh, but it sounds like a wheeze. “I think I told you, but I’m like—entirely self-taught. So things like drawing lessons...yeah, my dad was not into that. And if he knew I would be staring at naked people? No way, he would have let me come anyway.” Alfred continues chuckling so it seems lighthearted.

Kiku shrugs his shoulders noncommittally and resumes tapping on his phone. “Well, the models are usually old. I don’t really see what’s the big deal. I did a few in high school but it always felt very academic. It’s hard to be attracted to a sixty-year-old dude with a flabby chest.”

You stared at naked old people in high school? Alfred thinks. His mind is blown. Especially since his senior year experience was mostly spent watching porn in his room and sketching the people in those videos. (After secretly jacking off, of course.)

Boy, did they have different high school lives. Alfred can’t even look at Kiku in the eyes for a bit. He focuses on inhaling his cigarette.

“Done. You’re signed up. We’re set for the Tuesday class.” Kiku sets his phone down on the table. “You’re a slow smoker, you know that? I would be done, already.”

Alfred laughs, holding his half-cigarette away from the table. “Feel free to go in, if you want. I won’t be long.”

“At this rate you’ll take ages. But sure,” Kiku stands up from the table. “Watching you smoke makes me want a soda. I’ll see you back in the studio.”

Alfred waves him off, and goes back to his cigarette in silence. Well, not total silence. There’s crows picking at food left over on the other bench, and the sliding of the doors every time students pop in and out of the building. But he’s the only one sitting at the table.

He’s nearly at the butt of his cigarette when the tall foreign student walks down the path.

Alfred goes ramrod-straight at the sight of him. The cigarette forgotten between his fingers.

The student is walking languidly down the path—dressed in actual clothing, thank God. His cardigan and trousers are both covered in white splotches, and it looks like he’s rolling a cigarette as he’s strolling. It also seems like he’s muttering to himself. Unless Alfred’s vision

is so poor he can't see the earbuds, but no—the student gets closer and he's still murmuring something inaudible as he approaches his usual smoking spot.

Which Alfred is currently sitting in.

“Uh, need a light?” Alfred asks, heart lodged in his throat. He extends his blue lighter forward hopefully.

The student stops in front of the table and slowly raises his large, indigo eyes. They widen as if noticing Alfred for the very first time. A pair of white stars center in his pupils, making him seem even more attractive than before, but also a little bit unnerving. As though Alfred is finally being noticed.

“Yes,” the man says with a smile, rolling his sleeves to the elbow as he settles down on the opposite bench. His arms are just as pale as his face.

Alfred sucks in an eager breath.

Oh, okay. It's happening now.

He holds his lighter forward and ignites the flame. Alfred is captivated as he watches the man lean forward with his narrow, hand-rolled cigarette and light the tip. His pink lips puckered around it.

Alfred imagines all sorts of things about this man's mouth and his face gets even hotter. Porn has been awful for his imagination.

“Thank you,” the man tells him after exhaling his first breath of smoke. His English is heavily accented, and Alfred can guess Eastern European, but he's not sophisticated enough to guess specifics.

Alfred nods before noticing his own cigarette dwindling to nothing and nearly burning his fingers. He drops it onto the gravel and scrambles for another so he can keep this conversation going.

“I see you around a lot. What's your name?” Alfred asks after lighting another cigarette. His puffs come out shorter. He's never smoked two cigarettes in succession.

The man turns away from a faraway direction and looks at Alfred again. “Ivan,” he says, smiling again.

Oh. Not Simon. Ivan! Now it makes sense. Ivan totally suits this guy. Kind of foreign, but hot at the same time.

Wait. That's not the route that Alfred wants to go down.

“And you?” Ivan tilts his chin questioningly.

“Alfred. I'm Alfred,” he says quickly, gesturing to his chest. There's a mounting pressure to keep talking and Alfred can't fight it. “We met before actually. Like,” he gestures to the

doorway, “Over there. I ran into you and knocked you over.”

“Oh, yes. You’re the strong one,” Ivan acknowledges with a slight nod. “With the funny drawings.”

Before Alfred can even appreciate being called the strong one (holy shit, he loves that), he’s thrown by the description of his art. What is so funny about a superhero cradling the body of his dying brother?

His mood sours a little.

“Well, they’re comics, so it’s kind of stylized. But they’re not actually funny. Well, not all of them. Not mine. You just haven’t read the story.” Alfred forces some confidence into his voice.

Ivan’s smile brightens. “All comics are funny because they are not real life. Just fantasy. But I enjoyed looking at them very much.”

Alfred’s eyes narrow. He doesn’t really know what to say to that. Is it passive aggressive? A language barrier? Genuine praise? He has no clue.

“So you are majoring in comics, yes?” Ivan confirms.

Alfred keeps his voice pleasant enough. “In illustration. There’s no formal comics program here, but people who want to do comics or children’s books or whatever are kind of lumped into the same—”

“Ah, for children! Yes, that makes sense. It seems very much for children,” Ivan tells him.

Alfred presses his lips together. He doesn’t think his comics are for children, but he doesn’t see why that’s a problem either. It feels like it’s a demeaning comment—somehow made to degrade the quality of his work—but Ivan’s smile made everything hard to decipher. Once again, Alfred wonders if there’s something lost in translation.

“Uh,” Alfred clears his throat. He wants to get on this guy’s good side before circling back to this. “What is your major? You’re a student here, right?”

“I’m a painter,” Ivan answers. “This is actually my second time doing a painting degree. Perhaps that makes me an expert now?” He purses his lips thoughtfully and drums his other hand on the table.

Alfred shifts his fingers further away so there’s no chance of them touching. “Why is it your second time?”

“I dropped out the first time. Yes, I was too tired to go to classes,” Ivan sighs, ashing his cigarette onto the ground. “So here I am doing it again, but in another country. Life is very strange.”

Alfred realizes he’s staring at Ivan’s mouth again, wondering if his lips are as soft as they look, and barely heard what was said. “I’d love to see your art sometime,” he blurts.

Ivan raises his brows like he's genuinely puzzled by the question, "You would? Why?"

Alfred's mouth opens and closes. He didn't think his own curiosity would be a surprise. He's naturally so curious about every part of Ivan. He feels like anyone would be. What kind of paintings does someone who wears a bathrobe half the day even make?

Before Alfred can formulate a proper response, they're interrupted.

"Ivan!" A man calls.

Both Ivan and Alfred turn toward the voice, finding the shorter foreign student approaching the picnic bench. There's a hand-rolled cigarette tucked behind his ear. He's smiling, but his eyes narrow questioningly at the sight of Alfred on the bench.

He says something in another language to Ivan.

"This is Alfred. He's a new friend," Ivan announces pleasantly. "Alfred, this is Gilbert. He's a painter too."

All of the worries flooding Alfred's chest evaporate hearing Ivan call them friends. That's a good sign, isn't it? Even if Ivan's taste in art is clearly *dogshit*, at least they can get along. That counts for something.

Gilbert climbs up the bench so he can park his ass on the table. His gaze picks Alfred apart as he plucks his cigarette from behind his ear with ring-covered fingers and wordlessly accepts Ivan's lighter.

"I've seen you around a lot. Usually rushing by with your huge-ass backpack and ruler. Nice of you to finally stop by. Did you need a change of scenery or something?" Gilbert smirks, flashing his teeth.

The first thing Alfred notices is that Gilbert's accent is different than Ivan's. Which seems strange, considering how often they speak to each other in some foreign language.

"He offered me a light," Ivan says in that strange musical tone.

Gilbert raises a brow at him.

"Yeah, I was just out for a smoke break," Alfred agrees with a grin. He drops his cigarette and stomps it out. He feels better when he rises to his full height and Gilbert is no longer looming over him. "Well, I should probably head back inside. Well, it was nice meeting you Ivan, and uh..." Alfred opens his eyes innocently and pretends to forget.

"Gilbert," he answers, wilting from his cocky pose.

Alfred flashes a smile and snaps his fingers. "Right. Gilbert. Okay. See you guys later!"

He only waits to see Ivan's wave before turning around.

Alfred strides back into the building feeling pretty good about himself. Two cigarettes in a row definitely didn't agree with him, but he doesn't care. He has Ivan's name. He talked to him. They're friends.

It's all worth it.

Matthew doesn't believe Alfred's story.

"So it actually worked? You got this guy's number?" Matthew asks, opening a box of pizza.

Alfred tears his gaze away from the pepperoni topping. "What?" he blinks, repeating Matthew's answer in his head. "No. No, what the hell, Matt? I never said I wanted his number." Alfred crosses his arms over his chest defensively. He wills the image of Ivan's lips out of his brain. "I just said that I wanted to talk to him. Which I did. We had a conversation. It was decent. Even if he has no taste in art. So my plan worked."

"Oh," Matthew's shoulders sag. He finishes sliding two slices of pizza onto a plate. "So that's it then?"

"What do you mean?"

Matthew turns one hand up. "Like, that was the whole thing? Buy a pack of smokes just to get the guy's name and major? I dunno, that's pretty dull, Al."

"I don't know if that's dull," Alfred replies, feeling his cheeks color. "I mean, it's only a start. I will probably talk to him again. Maybe I can get through his dense head and force a compliment out of him. Who the hell doesn't like comics anyway? Do you think he's one of those modern art freaks?"

Matthew glances at him. "You're blushing. You like him. Just get his number or something and stop stinking up the apartment. I thought we'd be free of this smell after we got out of home."

"You've stolen three cigarettes from me so you have no room to talk." Alfred stomps to the fridge and grabs a Diet Coke from his stockpile.

Matthew watches him carefully. "You want any of this? I got a large because I was thinking we'd share."

"Already ate," Alfred lies, walking fast so he can close himself off in his room.

He's not hungry. He drinks his soda, draws in his sketchbook, and thinks about Ivan's lips.

Alfred makes smoking at the picnic bench a habit. He sees Ivan there in the mornings and sometimes the afternoons. It's surprisingly easy to slot into this tiny part of his life.

Ivan is so different than anyone in Alfred's course and anyone that Alfred knows. He's amazingly blunt. Possibly without knowing how he comes across. It doesn't sit well with

Alfred at all. He's unaccustomed to such barefaced opinions without any concern if it sits well with him or not. But Alfred finds Ivan's presence so strange and magnetic, that he puts up with it anyway. There's a part of him that hopes to earn his approval, somehow.

Maybe he's also really attracted to him too. Matthew's assumption is apparently not far off, because the more time Alfred spends with Ivan the more fantasies he seems to have. He was obsessed with Ivan's lips at first, but now he finds himself staring at Ivan's hands, arms, shoulders, skin, eyes—pretty much every part of him—with lust.

Alfred learns that Ivan is Russian. Gilbert is German. But they met at a German university, so that might explain why they speak the same language with each other. Gilbert is apparently doing a master's degree, while Ivan is repeating his undergrad. They came over here together, but it seems like it was Gilbert's idea.

Unlike Alfred, Ivan does not seem ambitious at all. Painting is what matters most to him, but he doesn't care if he is shown in galleries after graduation or becomes a hobbyist. He just wants to paint. Despite this, he does have very strong opinions about art and has not budged one inch on that matter. Alfred's tried showing him comic books of varying subjects to try and change Ivan's mind about the genre, and Ivan always indulges by looking them over, calmly perusing the pages, before looking at Alfred with that enigmatic smile.

"They're very cute. But it's not real life. Is that why you like them so much? Because you have such a childlike imagination?"

Alfred fumes. But silently. It's always silently. Aloud, he tries to be more eloquent. Getting into arguments with Ivan is never his goal. He wants to persuade him, charm him somehow.

"Well, imagination is everything, right? Where's the fun in life if you can't imagine the possibilities?"

"But these are not drawings of real life. They're cartoons." Ivan smiles.

If Alfred wasn't so distracted by Ivan wearing the robe today, he might have had a better retort, but as it was he could only ogle the peak of Ivan's right peck and mumble tonelessly: "Well, comics are like visual storytelling. It's not much different to a novel or a movie, you know..."

He doesn't recall Ivan's reply if there was one.

Before Alfred knows it, Ivan's stamping out his cigarette and says he has to get going. Alfred rushes to his feet at the same time, blurting a very similar excuse. He glides back into the studio, tucking the new pack of cigarettes into the pocket of his jacket and takes a seat at his desk.

Kiku is there to greet him, albeit briefly. He's too busy drawing to lift his head completely, and it's not long until Alfred joins him in that state of concentration. Alfred becomes so immersed in his work that when he gets a nudge at his shoulder, he nearly keels over in his chair.

“Shit, what is it?” Alfred exclaims, ripping out his earbuds.

Kiku is standing over him, his backpack strap slung over one shoulder. “It’s Tuesday. We have life drawing class. Did you forget?”

Actually, Alfred didn’t even know what day it was. His head is such a mess of drawing, hungry, Ivan, and drawing.

“You did forget,” Kiku supplies with a laugh. “I guess it’s good we’re going to the same time slot then. Get your stuff or we’re going to be late.”

“Shit, yeah.” Alfred scrambles to stuff his pencil bag and sketchbook in his backpack. He leaves his comic draft on his desk to retrieve later.

With his backpack stuffed, he joins Kiku in the walk out the building.

“You’re a good artist, I’m surprised this is your first time doing a life drawing class,” Kiku notes.

Alfred’s not about to admit all of the awful ways he learned human anatomy. So he just wheezes a chuckle. “Yeah, gonna be interesting I guess.”

“It’s not as awkward as it sounds. Seriously, once you see the model, you kind of forget they’re a real, naked human.”

“I guess I’ll take your word for it,” Alfred scoffs. He doesn’t think that’s possible though. But he’s not about to tell Kiku that he’s never seen another live person naked before. He has enough embarrassment going into this already. No one else is self-taught like him. Alfred’s pretty much an anomaly in his class.

The life drawing class is a tiny building up the road from the illustration department. Alfred and Kiku walk inside and find about a dozen other students from their major already sitting at the easles with charcoal in hand. A teacher is circling the room giving brief instructions.

Kiku and Alfred both collect their charcoal and sketchbooks from the side of the room before finding empty easles and setting their supplies down.

“Hopefully, it’s not some fat old man,” Kiku sighs. “That’s always the case when I do these things.”

Alfred forces a smile. He arranges his charcoal sticks in the meantime.

The teacher calls the class to attention, and they all turn towards her at the same time. A man strides though the door and closes it behind himself.

“Your model is here. You will have five minutes to do a gestural sketch of each pose. I will be here if you need any assistance,” she says.

The man steps onto the small stage in the center of the room and Alfred nearly drops his charcoal.

That's Ivan.

His pale oval face. His fair blond hair and wide dark eyes. Alfred knows him anywhere. But he's a student—how is he also a model for a life drawing course?

“Oh, good. At least he's young,” Kiku whispers to Alfred, getting his hand ready by his sketchbook. “Guess you're a lucky first-timer, Al.”

Am I? Alfred doesn't feel very lucky. Seeing the man he's been trying to befriend slowly peel off his robe and—

Alfred turns his gaze away. He doesn't know if he can look at Ivan naked. They're *friends*. Acquaintances. It's way, way too soon for any of that. Especially with all of Alfred's weird fantasies going on, this can't be good for them. And how weird will it make their conversations after this? Maybe Ivan is doing this for money, but he never expected someone he knew to be in the class.

Oh, fuck, Alfred's heart is practically kicking out of his chest.

“Alright class, I'm going to set a timer. After five minutes the model will change positions so observe carefully and draw quickly,” the teacher warns.

Alfred's teeth sink into his lower lip as he steels his resolve. Maybe this isn't as bad as he makes it out to be. If this is just a job to Ivan, he's probably used to people staring at him all the time. Why should Alfred be any different?

He picks up his charcoal and directs his gaze to the center of the room.

Ivan is leaning against a stool, his large pale body on full display. Amazingly, he seems at ease with the attention, perhaps even bored. His long nose is turned in the opposite direction, so perhaps he hasn't even noticed Alfred yet.

That's good, Alfred thinks. Maybe, somehow, he can get out of this thing without awkwardly admitting to Ivan that: “*Hey, yeah. I saw you naked. We cool?*”

“Begin!” says the teacher.

At once, the room starts sketching. Alfred feels like he's the last one to start, because he's too busy staring. He's known Ivan for about a week, and spied on him for a whole lot longer, but this is the first time he's seen him like this.

Alfred knew that Ivan's shoulders were broad, but he didn't know that his wide chest tapered to his waist like that. Ivan always wears boxy, kind of loose clothing, so the shape of his figure wasn't really clear. His body is soft, but also athletic too. His thighs are thick with muscle, which is even more evident with how he's bent his knee like that.

Alfred presses his charcoal once, creating a dark dot on the page, but gets distracted by Ivan's ankles. And then his calves, and then his knees. Alfred can't look at a part of him without thinking the most awful thoughts. And he's all too aware of how Kiku and everyone else is sketching ferociously at his side.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Time!” calls the teacher. The class flips the page of their sketchbook in unison.

Ivan lets out a little sigh and shifts his body to the other side. In doing so, he meets Alfred’s all-too-wide gaze.

Shit.

Alfred goes scarlet the longer he stares at Ivan.

Strangely, Ivan does not have the same reaction. His lips curl into that very familiar smile, which is surely fake and he directs his attention to some other wall of the room.

Is that permission? Is it a sign that it’s all okay?

Whatever the case, Alfred has to start drawing. He guides his shaky hand to the page and begins mapping out Ivan’s body piece by piece, eyes darting to and from the easel every to check his accuracy.

He’s hyperaware of every micro movement that Ivan makes. The way his chest expands with his breath—Alfred stares at his nipples. They’re hard. And pink. And so pretty. He didn’t even realize how pretty nipple could be until he’s forced to stare at them in class.

Alfred makes maybe half a sketch of Ivan’s chest before time is called again and he’s forced to flip the page.

Ivan shifts into another position, and for the first time Alfred sees his crotch. As in—his actual penis and balls—and the rest of his remaining working brain cells pretty much give up after that.

Alfred draws something on the page, but he doesn’t know how good it is. He’s too busy staring at Ivan’s flaccid cock like it’s the most beautiful thing on Earth, wondering how it tastes, how big it gets when it’s hard, how—

“Time!”

And Ivan shifts again.

The whole class goes like that. Alfred is caught between wildly, unabashedly ogling and hurriedly sketching something so it seems like he’s participating. Which he is. He definitely is. But more in the observing part than the capturing part.

By the end of class, Alfred’s pants feel tight, his cheeks are flushed, and even Kiku turns to him with concerned eyes.

“Woah, are you okay? You look feverish,” Kiku notes, abandoning his supplies to reach out to Alfred’s forehead.

“I’m fine!” Alfred says much too quickly. He stumbles out of his stool so fast it knocks over. “Shit. Yeah, I’m fine! I just got a little hot in here. Too many people or something. I run hot. I dunno if you knew that. But yeah, I—I run hot.” Alfred rights his stool and quickly closes his sketchbook and the last visible evidence of Ivan’s naked penis and ass from his view.

The real life Ivan already left the studio.

“It’s not that hot,” Kiku points out unhelpfully. After watching Alfred struggle with his supplies, he sighs and bends down to help. “You’re pretty absent-minded, you know that? I noticed you missed half of the poses.”

Alfred’s blush burns harder. “Oh, I did? I guess I was stuck. First time, and all.”

“True,” Kiku agrees, standing up. “It’s a lot harder drawing a model, isn’t it?”

Thankful for the excuse, Alfred sighs. “Yeah, totally. I wasn’t expecting how hard it would be. I was way over my head.” He falls into step with Kiku and they exit the building.

“Well, the class is four weeks long, so you’ll have more time to practice. I’m sure it’ll get better.”

Alfred’s gaze is pulled to the side of the life drawing building, where Ivan is smoking a cigarette under the shade of the roof. He’s in a robe again, but it doesn’t help Alfred at all. His eyes follow the triangle of skin from Ivan’s neck to his chest, and Alfred knows how to finish the rest of him in his head.

It’s a beautiful image. It’s also disturbing. Alfred already had a hard time looking at Ivan’s mouth for Christ’s sake.

Alfred’s breath quickens when Ivan looks right at him and smiles.

Remembering he didn’t answer Kiku’s question, Alfred lets out a strangled laugh: “Will it?” The swoop in his belly every time he meets Ivan’s eyes isn’t very promising.

Alfred works in the studio until nine in the evening. There was too much pent up energy after the life drawing class. He needed to drown himself in work so he didn’t obsess over how to bring up the subject to Ivan tomorrow.

Once his left eye, the weaker one, starts twitching though, Alfred lets out a sigh. He rubs his eyelids underneath his glasses and decides he’s probably done for the day.

After packing up his things into his backpack, he turns off his lamp, and gives a short goodbye to Kiku as to not disturb his inking. Alfred strides out of the room and heads downstairs. The stiffness in his legs starts to loosen once he gets to the final step.

There are some other students milling around, since the studios are open until midnight. Alfred passes through the cafeteria and does a double take when he sees Ivan bending down to retrieve something from the vending machines.

Alfred stops, unsure of what to do. The door just in front of Ivan is the one he usually takes to go to the main road. But he didn't expect to see Ivan today. The image of his naked body is still burned into his brain. It doesn't matter that Ivan's wearing a turtleneck and pants.

Alfred shakes out of it.

"Hey, Ivan!" he says, clenching the strap of his backpack for comfort. "You finished for the day?"

Ivan looks up as he cracks open the soda. "I'm just starting, actually. I had to work today."

"Oh," Alfred's smile teeters. "Right. Yeah. Duh."

"Are you walking this way?" Ivan points to the door and waits for Alfred's nod. "Then we can walk together."

"Sure," Alfred swallows, ignoring his thundering heart.

They exit the door, and stroll down the path. It's dark outside, but there are some lamps illuminating their way. Alfred tries to avoid looking at Ivan's face, but it's almost impossible. He's drawn to it helplessly.

"I didn't expect to see you in the class," Ivan notes thoughtfully. "Do cartoonists need to learn anatomy?"

"Of course they do! I—well, you've seen my art. I draw tons of people. And it's kind of realistic."

"Realistic is not a word I'd apply to you or your art."

"I'm sorry—uh, not about my art, I think your opinion is ridiculous, actually," Alfred scowls. He checks Ivan's expression nervously. "But I'm sorry if the class was awkward because I was there. I didn't know that was your job. Do you...see people you know a lot?"

"I don't know many people, so no," Ivan laughs. "But most people don't look at me beyond something to draw, so there is no reason for me to feel embarrassed."

Kiku said something similar, but Alfred doesn't think it's possible to divorce these growing feelings for Ivan from seeing his naked body on full display.

His brows knit together, unsure of what to say.

"Although you are a little different, aren't you?" Ivan says, tipping his head to the side.

Alfred's lips part as he looks up at him. Ivan's eyes seem almost violet under the glare of the lamp.

Does Ivan know what he was thinking during class? It's impossible, but Alfred feels totally caught out with the way he's being examined right now. Even though he didn't say anything, and even though he tried hard to avoid Ivan's gaze during the entire class.

“I...” Alfred blinks rapidly. “I gotta go this way.” He points to where the campus meets the street. “See you tomorrow, I guess? Or, see you around?”

Ivan’s smile melts that haunting look from his face—thank fuck. “Good night, Alfred.”

Alfred practically bolts around the corner, only breathing easily when he knows he’s entirely out of Ivan’s eyesight. Alfred’s hands reach up to cup his boiling ears.

How is it that he feels more exposed than the one who stripped off their clothes? It doesn’t feel fair at all.

Maybe there is one thing that Ivan is not wrong about. Alfred doesn’t like reality, and especially the real version of himself. He’d never want anyone to see that. The thought of Ivan getting a glimpse makes his throat tighten. But there’s no way that will happen.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“He seemed the same, aside from how long he looked at you,” Kiku answers with a shrug. “Are you guys dating or something?”

Alfred goes stiff. “What? No. I said we’re friends. Just friends.”

After the Tuesday life drawing class, things go back to normal between Alfred and Ivan. They see each other at the picnic bench to smoke before or between classes. Occasionally, they get lunch. The routine becomes so comfortable to Alfred that when he passes by the table with his diet soda, excited to see Ivan’s face but finds Gilbert sitting alone, he automatically swings the other way.

But it’s too late.

“Hey, moneybags!” Gilbert yells after him. “Get your ass over here, or am I not good enough for you?” Gilbert’s grin is mocking, and he points at the bench across for Alfred to sit down.

Alfred laughs to hide his discomfort and joins Gilbert at the table.

There’s a bag of tobacco, and a package of cigarette papers and filters. Gilbert finishes closing the cigarette he just rolled with a lick of his tongue.

Alfred rubs the back of his neck. “Hey Gil, why are you calling me moneybags? I’m pretty sure your right shoe is worth more than my whole outfit.” He looks down at Gilbert’s sneakers scornfully and pulls out the pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He doesn’t know what else to do.

Gilbert swipes them from Alfred’s hand. “Amateur,” he scoffs, wagging the pack in the air. “It’s because of your damn cigarettes! You’re buying packs. Do you have any idea how expensive that is?”

“I mean, yeah. Because of taxes or whatever, right? But I don’t smoke that much.” Alfred shrugs.

Gilbert shakes his head and slaps Alfred’s pack on the other side of the table. “Sit your ass down. It’s time you learned how to roll.” He pushes the supplies closer to Alfred’s hands.

“I am sitting,” Alfred mutters. But he’s been curious about the process for a while so he tentatively plucks one of the thin papers and holds it in his hand. “Is this how they do it in Europe then?”

Alfred has a lot of questions about Europeans, because all of his examples feel so disjointed. His dad is from England, but he's pretty much Gilbert's opposite. All about rules and doing things properly. Alfred and Matthew used to go back to the UK in the summer to see their relatives. Alfred doesn't remember much beyond their posh accents calling him the "chubby American twin" and Matthew the "skinny one." He was kind of glad when their dad had some falling out with his brothers and they never went back. Even if he really liked the chocolate over there.

Alfred can only imagine what his dad would say at the amount of jewelry Gilbert wore or the way he dyed his hair like that. If Gilbert has tattoos underneath his clothes, Alfred's dad wouldn't even talk to him. Germany must be a lot different than England.

Alfred also doesn't know many people who'd be okay with strangers seeing them naked like Ivan, but he feels like that's more of an Ivan thing than a European thing. He can't imagine it's a Russian trait because it seems so cold there.

"Sure is. But I've seen some people do it here too. The cool ones. It's way more economical if you're going to be a smoker," Gilbert says, answering Alfred's question. "And it's kind of fun too, once you get the hang of it. Just copy what I'm doing."

Alfred watches how Gilbert deposits a pinch of loose tobacco onto the paper and then gently rolls it into a tube shape. He tries to do the same, but his fingers don't look nearly as nimble.

"Why does it feel like I'm rolling a joint?" Alfred comments awkwardly.

"Yeah, you can learn how to do those too, if you want."

"No, thanks," Alfred says, voice sharper than he intended.

It's not like he really cares what other people do, but weed seems to only equal unproductive in his eyes and he has so much to do.

He's also seen how much Matthew eats after he comes back to the apartment stoned, and it's another reason to avoid it.

"Man, I thought I was wound tight but you really have a stick up your ass, you know that? That's too much tobacco. Take some of it out."

Alfred does as he's told and the cigarette looks better. He chances a glance at Gilbert and tries to keep his tone as conversational as possible. "So where's Ivan, anyway? He would usually be here by now."

"Didn't feel like coming in today. Sometimes he gets like that. Very moody guy, if you haven't noticed already. So that means no eye candy for you aside from yours truly," Gilbert smirks.

Alfred hides his panic with a throaty laugh. "What are you talking about?" He doesn't stare at Ivan *that* much, does he?

“Please, don’t even bother,” Gilbert dismisses with a wave of his hand. “You undress him with your eyes whenever he’s nearby. And what a waste of energy because the guy takes them off anyway! He’s not hiding anything. Motherfucker is an open goddamn book.”

“I do *not* undress him with my eyes,” Alfred say hotly. It makes him sound so *dirty*. He’s come to terms with his crush, but he bends over backwards so it’s not obvious. Especially when he has to see Ivan naked once a week. “We’re friends. I like him. He’s weird, but I kind of like that. I don’t know anyone like him.”

Gilbert rests his chin in his hand as he gives Alfred a long once over. “You know, you’re not really Ivan’s type. He usually ends up with more brooding kind of guys.”

“I never said I was his type,” Alfred reddens. “I said—”

“But if you ask him out, I think he’d say yes,” Gilbert shrugs. He licks off another cigarette and drops it next to the other one. “He kind of likes you, I think.”

Alfred perks up in his seat. “He does? Did he tell you that? What’d he say?”

Gilbert turns away thoughtfully. “Once, he told me that you look like a chicken with your head cut off with the way you run around campus. Does that count?” He bursts into laughter.

Alfred’s jaw sets tightly. So he *is* being screwed with. “Oh, fuck you.” He closes the cigarette with a pass of his tongue, drops it next to Gilbert’s row, and stomps to his feet.

“Hey, now. Let me see that,” Gilbert whistles. He picks up Alfred’s cigarette to inspect it. Then, flashes a smile. A real one that reaches his eyes. “Well, congrats—Alfred. I think you managed to roll a good one.”

“Uh, thanks, I guess.” Alfred picks up his pack and returns it to his pocket. He slides his backpack on and leaves, pretending he doesn’t care about Gilbert’s approval, but the truth is earning that odd bit of praise from him actually made Alfred’s day.

He likes being good at things.

Sometimes, Alfred and Ivan get lunch together. It’s not Alfred’s favorite activity. He isn’t a fan of people watching him eat. It makes him think about his parents watching him eat and taking things away from his plate. Or being at camp where everything was supervised.

But normal people don’t do that, he realizes. So, he sits there with his Diet Coke and some protein bar and stares at Ivan’s plate of cheese fries with undisguised hunger. He hasn’t had cheese since before camp and it looks *so* good, especially with the way Ivan eats it.

After sipping his soda, Alfred looks up. “I’ve been meaning to ask this for a while, but is this all you eat? Cheese fries?”

“I like it,” Ivan says, bringing another fry to his mouth. He’s wearing a lumpy purple sweater that’s both awful and wonderful with the way it brings out the violet in his eyes. No paint stains are on it yet.

Alfred's smile widens. "Yeah, that doesn't answer my question," he laughs. "Seriously, I've only seen you eat these things. That doesn't seem healthy." The last part slipped out unintentionally, and he knows he's in the wrong before he gets a look.

Ivan raises a brow at him. "It's rude to comment on what people eat, you know."

Alfred flushes. "Oh, shit. Sorry. I didn't mean to. Yeah, I guess I would be bothered too."

"I'm not bothered," Ivan shrugs. "I don't really care what you think. Or if you're rude. I eat these because it's the only thing I can eat at the cafeteria that's not salad. And I don't like salads." He sees Alfred's questioning stare and adds, "I have celiac."

Alfred's doesn't know if he's met someone with celiac before, but he's vaguely aware of what it is. Something about gluten or bread.

"Fries are gluten free?" Alfred tilts his head to the side. "Huh. I never would have guessed."

Ivan lets out a musical laugh. "Do you know what gluten is?"

"I mean, yeah," Alfred replies defensively. "Like bread, flour, that sort of thing. But fries seems so, uh, unhealthy. Especially for someone with a condition." He freezes, sensing Ivan's expression shift. "Shit, was that rude too? I actually love fries too, so it's not like I don't get the appeal. I used to eat them by the truckload. Like seriously, I had a problem—!"

"I'm sure the cigarettes I smoke are much worse, but I'm still here for now," Ivan interrupts with a smile. He pushes his plate closer. "Would you like some?"

This is the first thing that Ivan's ever offered Alfred, and the tiny gesture feels strangely sweet. It's definitely against the diet regimen Alfred was given, but it's not like he follows that to the letter anyway. He—he cheats sometimes. It's just one time. It'd be rude to say no, right?

The clench of Alfred's empty stomach is what makes him eventually pick up a fork to stab the cheese-coated fry. "Uh, sure. I mean, yeah it won't kill me. Probably."

Matthew'd probably hit him over the head with how he's more concerned with a fry than a cigarette, but it's not like Alfred would ever tell him this.

He eats it, surprised by how much flavor it has. He can't believe he forgot how good it tasted.

Ivan watches him eat and chuckles. "You're very funny."

They eat the rest of the fries together and then share a cigarette afterward. Alfred goes back to class feeling better than he has in a long while.

Tuesdays become the day Alfred both dreads and loves. Even before he reaches campus, his stomach is filled with butterflies, knowing that in a few hours he will get to see Ivan's naked body and have permission to stare.

It didn't get any less awkward after the first time. Alfred still gets hot when Ivan takes off the robe and gets into the first pose. But he's able to sketch more the second time. He doesn't get hard during class. Alfred might actually die if that happened. But he does feel a certain awareness in his jeans. Like his dick perks up at the sight of Ivan's thighs and chest, and—well, everything else.

Alfred does his best to ignore it though, and in doing so, he can sketch and pretend like it's not totally weird to ogle a friend he secretly has a crush on. The only time this doesn't work is when Ivan meets his gaze, because then Alfred doesn't know how to hide whatever yearning he's feeling deep in his gut.

He wants him. Alfred wants Ivan so badly. At first, he didn't even realize it was physical. But now, Alfred looks at Ivan and wants to touch him and discover where he's firm and soft. Even more electrifying than that is wondering how Ivan would touch him.

He has large hands, but he does everything pretty carefully, almost delicately. But then sometimes, Alfred sees the flash of annoyance in Ivan's eyes, when he is most blunt, most cutting, and thinks there's a bit of an evil streak too. So his imagination creates versions of both scenarios.

By the fourth week, Alfred and Ivan hold eye contact for nearly half the class. Not all at once, of course, because Ivan has to change every five minutes. But pretty much as soon as he settles, Ivan is glancing at him again.

Apparently it's obvious enough that Kiku nudges Alfred's side. "Hey, do you know him?"

"What?" Alfred's voice goes high. He tears his gaze away from Ivan, but the stare at the side of his face makes his neck burn.

Kiku purses his lips. "He's looking at you a lot. I don't normally see that."

"I, uh," Alfred flounders for an excuse, "Well, actually he's a friend." *Yeah, that's all he is.*

"Oh my god, what? That—I mean, no wonder you're," Kiku clamps his mouth shut before he can burst into laughter. His eyes still twinkle though. "Shit, and here I said it wasn't a big deal. No wonder you feel awkward."

Alfred's laugh sounds weak. "Yeah."

"I guess he doesn't mind then?" Kiku continues, clearly very curious about the situation. "Sometimes I wonder if these models are secretly nudists or something."

Alfred can't imagine Ivan walking naked on the beach for the life of him. Then again, what does he know, because Ivan surprises him around every turn.

The conversation with Kiku peters out when the teacher walks behind them, and Alfred returns to his sketch. His breathing shallows when he locks eyes with Ivan.

He's so beautiful, Alfred thinks. He's always thinking that. Whether Ivan has his clothes on or not. Actually, every time Alfred sees Ivan he becomes even more attractive somehow.

The yearning in Alfred's chest is so intense that it aches. He picks up where he left off and sketches the curve of Ivan's neck.

By the time class ends, Alfred is as feverish as ever. He closes his sketchbook and packs up his supplies in his backpack in a trance. It might be his imagination, but it looked like Ivan was blushing at the end.

Why? Because of how Alfred was staring? But everyone was staring at him.

Alfred's anxiety knots in his stomach as he joins Kiku in standing up.

"Are you okay?" Kiku asks, sounding more concerned than curious now.

"I'm fine," Alfred says quickly. They're waiting for the line to the door to thin out. Alfred chews his lips as he considers something. "Did Ivan look off to you, today?"

"Who's Ivan? The model?"

Alfred nods, mentally kicking himself for doxing Ivan's identity. Are they not supposed to know? Is it like a secret job or something? He's literally naked, how is it a secret?

"He seemed the same, aside from how long he looked at you," Kiku answers with a shrug. "Are you guys dating or something?"

Alfred goes stiff. "What? No. I said we're friends. Just friends."

Kiku's brows knit together. "Oh. I thought when you said friends you meant like *friends*." He emphasizes the last word so there's no mistaking what he means.

"Why would you assume that? I barely know him." Alfred's torn between surprise and desperation. Does Kiku see something that he doesn't?

"I guess I made a mistake," Kiku chuckles, leading the way to the door. They're the last ones to leave.

Alfred strides swiftly to his side again. "Wait, you can't just say something like that and not have a reason. I want to know. C'mon, please?"

Kiku opens his mouth to say something, but then looks over Alfred's shoulder and smirks. "I think he's waving to you."

Alfred whirls around and sees Ivan, still in his white robe, leaning against the side of the building wearing a pair of slippers. He's not smoking, which is a little startling. Actually, he doesn't seem to be doing anything at all aside from waiting for Alfred's attention.

After Alfred looks his way, Ivan smiles and gestures for him to come closer.

"We have a lecture in an hour," Kiku says out of the blue. "So, remember to come back for that."

“It won’t take an hour,” Alfred tells him, a little flustered. What is Kiku implying? Alfred and Ivan aren’t like that. They’re not. He still can’t meet Kiku’s gaze though. “But yeah, you go on ahead. I’ll see you...later.”

Kiku walks off. Alfred hurries toward Ivan.

“Hey, what’s up? You okay?”

“No,” Ivan says, smiling. “This way.”

As soon as Alfred’s within reach, Ivan grabs his arm with one large hand and guides him around the corner, where the building backs into a trail of dirt and a line of plants.

Alfred lets himself be pulled, awkwardly stepping along to keep up. “You have to tell me a secret or something? I guess it’s a good place for it. That and probably a murder,” he jokes, laughing to fill the air.

Ivan releases his arm and backs Alfred against the wall. The backpack breaks the impact, but whatever is inside digs uncomfortably into Alfred’s back.

Ivan’s palms slide on either side of Alfred’s face. Warm but firm. Alfred sees every fleck of purple and blue in Ivan’s eyes, all of his feathery pale lashes, as he leans closer and closer and —

Holy shit. Alfred sucks in a ragged breath as he realizes what’s happening.

“I love the way you look at me,” Ivan whispers quickly. He closes his mouth over Alfred’s and kisses him.

Kisses *him*.

Alfred’s eyes stay open the entire time. Everything happens so fast yet the moment feels endless. Ivan’s body presses against Alfred until their chests touch. There are two thumbs on Alfred’s cheeks and fingers by his jaw. These are all parts of Ivan that Alfred knows so well by sight but now they are touching him. Holding him.

Alfred doesn’t breathe the entire time. He doesn’t even kiss back. He’s not sure how to. Even his hands hover at the sides of Ivan’s waist unsure. A dark voice in his head is telling him that this is a mistake and Ivan doesn’t actually want him. No one wants him. Even though he’s thinner, there’s still something wrong and Alfred knows it. He just wishes he could fix it.

Before Alfred can even try to make up his mind about what to do, Ivan pulls away.

“You are supposed to kiss back,” he teases. Although his tone is light, worry tightens his eyes. “Or...do you not want to?”

Alfred breaks out of his stupor before Ivan’s hands leave him. “I do!” he blurts, grabbing onto Ivan’s waist and keeping him close. “I do. I—yeah, I mean. Who wouldn’t want to kiss you? I was just, uh, surprised. I didn’t think you...” *Liked me.* Alfred swallows the rest of the words.

The playful expression returns to Ivan's face and he leans in. "You didn't think I would notice? You are not very subtle."

"I'm not?" Alfred says dumbly.

He doesn't even know what Ivan's talking about. Everyone looks at Ivan. Unless Ivan is a mind reader, there's no way that he knows.

Although, as someone who thinks an awful lot about superpowers, Alfred can see mind-reading as the one someone as strange as Ivan would have.

"I like you," Ivan chuckles. And then he's kissing Alfred again.

This time Alfred's body melts. Not just because of how soft Ivan's lips are, it's because he also hears those words—and they go right *through* him. Excitement shoots down to his fingertips and after fumbling off his backpack and dropping it to the ground, he wraps his hands around Ivan's back and kisses back.

Alfred doesn't really know how to kiss well. He can count on one hand the number of awkward pecks he's given or received in high school, and none of them were good. But he tries anyway. Letting Ivan's tongue slip into his mouth and then trying to copy what he does. It goes from strange to addicting really quickly and Alfred can't even imagine stopping.

"This is becoming a problem," Ivan says between kisses. Now Alfred's hands are in his hair.

"What is?" Alfred asks, barely paying attention. He's just chasing Ivan's lips again. This is literally the only thing he wants to do forever.

Ivan laughs. "Not getting hard when you are looking at me in class."

Alfred stops kissing and stares down at Ivan's crotch incredulously. "Are you hard *now*?" He almost reaches out, but he doesn't even know what for. To check? To help?

Ivan gives him a funny look. "What do you think?"

Alfred thinks he sees a bulge in Ivan's robe. The idea is so fascinating, he literally cannot stop himself. "Do you want me to help?"

He hopes he doesn't sound too desperate. But Alfred would give anything to make Ivan feel good. Even if it's just this one time.

Ivan's lashes do a little flutter, and his cheeks color a bit more. After a second of deliberation, he silently guides one of Alfred's hands underneath one of the panels of his robe until Alfred touches something warm and hard. It's Ivan's cock.

And by some magic, it's hard because of Alfred. He can see even see part of it where his hand lifts the fabric away. It's much pinker than in class. And bigger too now that it's erect.

Alfred's hand gingerly wraps around it and he hears Ivan inhale. God he does *not* want to mess up.

“Uh,” Alfred looks up, “Long shot but do you have any lube or anything?” When he sees Ivan’s hesitation, Alfred hurriedly adds: “To make it feel good, I mean. My hand. On your dick. I don’t want it to hurt.”

Ivan’s lips curl. “Lick your hand.”

“Oh, right,” Alfred flushes. “Duh, nature’s lubricant.” He pulls away to lick his palm and fingers. Thank god he washed off the charcoal earlier.

“I’ve never thought of it like that.” Ivan sounds like he’s biting back a laugh.

Alfred feels even more nervous reaching down and grabbing Ivan’s cock. But the exhale by his face is encouraging. “Um,” he looks up to check. “So, like this? Is that good?”

“Yes,” Ivan nods. His blush spreads to his ears. But his eyes are dark. “You can hold me tighter. No need to be gentle.”

Fuck. Heat rushes to Alfred’s stomach, and lower. This is like from one of his fantasies only it’s real.

“Right,” he croaks, doing as Ivan says. He tightens his hand and starts stroking up and down. It’s awkward at first, but Alfred finds it a little less intimidating than kissing because at least he’s had more practice from jerking himself off.

Still, it’s a completely different sensation feeling someone else’s cock in his hand. It’s a little bigger. And longer. Alfred has to experiment a little bit to see what earns him a gasp or a moan.

Ivan wraps his arms around Alfred’s shoulders. “Your hand feels good,” he whispers, kissing Alfred’s jaw. “Were you thinking about this during class? Touching me?”

“What? No! I mean, I was drawing you,” he stammers, feeling hotter. “I was just—I was thinking about how to draw you.”

Ivan’s breath quickens as Alfred keeps going. “Faster. It’s good. You’re good.”

“Okay,” Alfred whispers, heart soaring from the praise. He keeps going, stroking just the way Ivan ordered, in all the ways that he likes it, until Ivan goes stiff against him. With a soft groan, he comes into Alfred’s palm.

Maybe that should be disgusting, but Alfred is practically glowing from the fact that he got Ivan off. It’s something he never thought would happen. Not with Ivan. And definitely not like this, behind the life drawing building in the middle of the afternoon—

“Holy shit, this is like public indecency,” Alfred blurts, eyes wide. “We’re—do you have another class after this?”

Ivan unwraps himself from Alfred’s shoulders and smiles. “Maybe I do. But we have still have some time.” He kisses Alfred once more, more fervently than before. “I want to take care of you too.”

“You do? You want to...like—what I just did?” Alfred leans back against the wall. His dirtied hand hovers awkwardly at his side because he doesn’t know what to do with it. Ivan tells him to clean it on his robe.

“If your eyes get any bigger you will look like your cartoons. Yes, I want to touch you. Do you?”

“Oh, well,” Alfred reddens. He’d been trying to ignore his dick this entire time, but now that it’s become a topic of conversation it’s definitely more than alert. Jerking Ivan off got him at least half-hard. “Yeah. I mean, yeah, of course. But—*Ivan!*”

After licking his hand, Ivan undoes Alfred’s jeans and reaches underneath the waistband of Alfred’s briefs. Alfred jumps when he feels him touch his cock. It may not be weird to give someone else a handjob, but receiving one? Alfred is more hypersensitive than ever.

“So you did get hard watching me. I thought so,” Ivan notes, sounding delighted.

And while Alfred does want to please him, he doesn’t want Ivan to think badly of him. “I wasn’t hard in class.” He furiously shakes his head. “Seriously! Don’t look at me like that. I was not! I’m not perverted.”

Ivan angles his wrist and strokes again. Alfred’s moans. There’s no way he’s close already. Ivan’s barely touched him. But his balls feel so tight, there’s no mistaking it.

“You’re pretty like this. I wonder how long this will take?” Ivan whispers by his ear.

Alfred’s eyes squeeze shut. He doesn’t even know if it’s been five strokes, but his body is coming undone rapidly. What is Ivan going to think if he can’t last even half as long? Alfred doesn’t want to mess up.

“Fuck. I’m—!” His voice breaks. When he turns his head, Ivan’s lips are pressing against his cheek. It’s so wonderful it’s painful.

“Does it feel good?”

“Yes, but—!”

It takes one more stroke and Alfred falls apart. He comes into Ivan’s hand, panting raggedly, head falling against the wall. Alfred can’t even enjoy the tired pleasure spreading through his body. He’s too horrified by what happened. He doesn’t even know if he made it to ten strokes. And he’s keenly aware of the way Ivan went still against him. He’s probably shocked too.

“Oh god—fuck. I’m sorry,” Alfred chokes, lashes wet. He blinks rapidly to get rid of the tears, because the last thing he needs is Ivan seeing him cry after sex. “I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to. You were good. Obviously. It’s my fault.” Alfred nudges Ivan’s hand away—the one that he dirtied—and quickly puts his cock away and pulls up his pants.

“Alfred,” Ivan says softly. “It’s okay.”

Alfred grabs his backpack from the ground, looking anywhere but at Ivan. “It’s not. It’s embarrassing. I didn’t think you’d touch me. That’s why—” His throat tightens dangerously. Alfred really is going to cry if he stays here. “I should go. I’m sorry.” He slips one strap over his shoulder.

“Don’t go yet. Please.” Ivan’s hand cups his bicep gently.

Alfred doesn’t want to look at him and see the pity in his eyes.

Ivan gives Alfred’s arm a gentle squeeze. “Kiss me again.”

Alfred inhales sharply, and turns around.

Ivan’s smile is soft. He says it once more: “Kiss me.”

“Really?” Alfred asks, already dropping his backpack to the ground.

This time, he’s the one who leans in, head tilting back a little so he can match Ivan’s height, and kisses first.

Alfred skips the lecture. He doesn’t even go back to the studio to draw. He’s so frazzled after everything that happened, he goes straight home. Smoking two cigarettes on the way back because he’s desperate for the distraction.

When he enters the apartment, he steps out of his shoes and mindlessly stares at the kitchen, finding Matthew already there.

“Jesus Christ, Al.” Matthew closes his laptop at the kitchen table and rushes to the door where Alfred’s still frozen in place. “Are you okay? You look—I dunno. If I didn’t know better I’d guess you’re stoned.”

“Uh, I...”

“Oh fuck, you are stoned?” Matthew holds his face and peers into his eyes. “Please tell me you mean weed and not like hard drugs. I don’t think I can keep up with this experimental phase of yours if I have to take you to rehab.”

Rehab is where people get fixed, right? Alfred kind of wonders if he needs that. Fat camp just altered how he looked, but the inside is just the same. Maybe worse than before.

But he doesn’t want Matthew to worry.

“I kissed Ivan,” Alfred manages eventually, cheeks warming now that he’s said it aloud. That means it really happened then. He still doesn’t know how.

Matthew takes a step back. “You—*what*? That’s why you look like you got ran over by a truck?” He gets a stare in response, and awkwardly puts a hand on his hip. “I mean, congrats, I guess? That was the plan, right?”

“I also gave him a handjob. Behind the life drawing building.”

“Okay, gross.” Matthew’s grin is happy though. Happy for Alfred. “Why the hell did you give me details? And public sex, really? You?”

Alfred shifts his weight. “He also, uh, gave me a handjob.”

“I really don’t need specifics, Al. Just say you had sex,” Matthew chuckles. “I mean, what if I have to talk to this guy?”

Alfred actually considers this, but he can’t imagine anyone not like Matthew. Even if it’s someone as unpredictable as Ivan would probably warm up to him.

Matthew clears his throat, because Alfred still isn’t saying anything. “But anyway, do you... do you feel okay about it? I’m guessing it was consensual.”

“I would have been okay if it wasn’t consensual.”

“I...think that still counts as consent,” Matthew says slowly, raising a brow.

Alfred chews his lower lip until it’s raw. He doesn’t know what to say, but since it’s Matthew, he has to say something. “I’m kind of freaked out,” he admits.

“Yeah, no shit. I can tell,” Matthew sighs, sounding relieved that Alfred’s talking. “Why? Because it’s your first time?”

Alfred looks at him quickly. “How do you know that? I never talked to you about my sex life before.”

“Because of that very reason,” Matthew laughs. “You share everything with me, Al. We’re each other’s walking, breathing diaries because we’re too shit at keeping real ones. If you had sex you would have told me the same day. Like you’re doing now.”

“I didn’t think that was going to happen,” Alfred admits, rubbing the back of his neck. “I... we just got out of class and he calls me to the back of the building and he just—kisses me. I went along with it, of course. It was great. But, but—”

“What?”

“What the hell does this mean?” Alfred exclaims, opening his arms. “Does he like me? Am I supposed to ask him out now? Was he just super horny from being naked all day? I don’t know! It all happened so fast, I wish I could replay it and figure it all out!”

“Okay, breathe,” Matthew laughs, though his eyes pinch in concern. “Why do you think he doesn’t like you? He kissed you first, right?”

“Because—! Because—! I don’t know!”

What is there to like about me? He thinks my art is shit. I can barely hold an intellectual conversation with him. I say rude shit right and left because I always have my foot in my

mouth. And I've seen Ivan naked and there's no way I can compare to that.

Ivan said he liked Alfred, but Alfred doesn't believe it. He can't believe it.

"Al?"

Alfred turns away. "Never mind. I'm being stupid. Let's just. I'm going to take a shower and maybe we can play video games or something. I don't want to think about it right now."

Matthew's shoulders drop. "Okay, but we can talk later if you want."

"Sure," Alfred smiles for his brother's benefit. He doesn't want to worry him with these stupid problems.

After a short shower and changing into fresh clothes, Alfred feels a little better. It's not like he feels bad. He's just feeling a lot more than he thought he would, and all of it is so conflicting it's giving him a stomach ache. While he wants to kiss Ivan again, he wants to know why Ivan would like him. Or maybe Alfred wants to prove he can be liked.

He leaves his room in sweat pants and an old t-shirt and joins Matthew on the couch when he's tired of thinking about it.

They play some mindless game and chatter a bit about Matthew's classes and the girl he likes. They get quiet again, and Alfred's mind wanders to the past.

"Do you remember when mom asked you if I was stealing your school lunch because I was fat and you were skinny?"

Matthew chokes on his soda. "Fuck. I mean—yeah. I do." He puts the can down and pauses the game. His expression is mildly horrified. "I haven't thought about it in years though. Do you still think about that?"

Alfred lets his gaze slide away as he clutches the controller a little tighter. "Sometimes."

"She's an asshole."

"Well, I did steal food from our pantry. Probably shouldn't have done that. I dunno why I eat when I'm stressed."

Matthew sighs. He settles back into the couch so his shoulder brushes with Alfred's. "You sound pretty depressed for someone who finally kissed their crush."

"I'm not depressed," Alfred counters, shrugging. "I'm just...thinking."

Matthew doesn't say anything for a moment, but Alfred doesn't mind it when he's quiet. He kind of likes hearing Matthew think.

His silence is comforting. It calms Alfred's nerves.

“I guess it makes sense,” Matthew says eventually. “I was pretty out of it when I lost my virginity too.”

Alfred chews the inside of his cheek. “I don’t think what I did counts. Pretty sure I’m still a virgin. Maybe I should stay that way.”

“Do you still like Ivan?”

“Well, yeah. A lot.”

“Do you want my advice?”

“Not really,” Alfred says, just to be contrary. He looks at Matthew anyway, because he actually does want to know.

Matthew smiles gently. “I think you should kiss Ivan again and see what happens. And stop overthinking every detail like I know you’re doing.”

Alfred turns away. His thumb rubs over the plastic controller as he considers this.

Matthew resumes the game, and Alfred joins in. They play for a few minutes without saying anything.

When the conversation is nearly forgotten, Alfred admits very quietly: “I liked kissing him.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Ivan smiles. “How about you come to my apartment?”

Alfred’s brain glitches. “Oh. Uh. Like...”

“Right now,” Ivan continues softly, “If you’re free.”

Alfred and Ivan kiss again the next day. There’s no life drawing class, and Ivan is in normal clothes—a turtleneck and a coat. Alfred seeks him out at the picnic table to share a cigarette, and Ivan takes him by the hand to lead him by a nearby tree and kisses him there.

Alfred’s still unsure what all of this means. He doesn’t really get it: why Ivan suddenly seems to like him one day. But he decides to just ignore that voice and go with it, because Ivan looks even better when he blushes.

They kiss before school, and sometimes mid-day, but always before Alfred leaves campus. They’re not always innocent kisses either. Ivan starts using his teeth, nibbling and then biting Alfred’s lips. It feels good, so Alfred does the same. Sometimes he’s the one who’s pushing Ivan against the tree or the wall or wherever they can be alone and leading the kiss. His hands get bolder too, clinging to Ivan’s waist or raking through his soft hair. He’s amazed that Ivan lets him sometimes. It seems too good to be true.

But they’re not always so secretive. Sometimes they kiss somewhere more in the open because they just can’t help it. Alfred sees Ivan sitting alone somewhere and he hurries over to straddle his lap and plunge his tongue into Ivan’s mouth. God, he just loves it. He loves how Ivan feels, how he sounds, how he looks. It’s so easy to get carried away.

“Get a room,” someone says, and a laugh follows.

Alfred turns toward the voice, flushed and embarrassed. “Oh shit.” The two students are already walking away, but he feels like the moment is broken.

“We can find a room,” Ivan says underneath him, smiling even more. He pushes Alfred up, and pulls him toward the life drawing building.

The door is unlocked, so they go inside. Ivan turns the lights on, and Alfred stares at the rows of empty easels.

“This is even better, don’t you think,” Ivan continues, draping his arms over Alfred’s shoulders. “I like it in here.”

Alfred's pulse is thrumming under his skin. The implication of being alone in a room feels different than kissing outside. They haven't done anything more than heavy petting since the handjob incident. Alfred's carefully avoided it, because he doesn't think the second time would work out better for him.

"What do you want to do?" Ivan asks, coyly moving his hand down in the direction of Alfred's crotch.

Alfred catches his wrist. "You don't need to touch me," he breathes, forcing a grin onto his face. "It's okay. I—I'd rather make you feel good."

Ivan tilts his head inquisitively. "Okay. But why?"

"I don't want to mess up again. I'd rather help you. Really. I want to," Alfred insists, placing his palms on Ivan's hips.

Ivan's brows knit together. "Alfred, you didn't mess up," he says gently, cupping Alfred's cheek in his hand. "There is no such thing when we do this."

Alfred ignores him. He doesn't want to be pitied. He wants to be *good* at something. So he bodily pushes Ivan down so he's sitting on the stage and kneels down between his legs. "Let me suck you off, okay? I want to. I've been thinking about a lot," he admits, smiling through his blush.

Ivan doesn't look entirely convinced, but his gaze does stray to Alfred's mouth. "Okay," he says, allowing Alfred to unbutton his pants. "Have you ever done this before?"

Alfred freezes. His silence is probably confirmation enough and he catches Ivan smiling at him again.

"Is that a problem?" Alfred asks.

Ivan shakes his head, chuckling a little. "Remember to cover your teeth with your lips."

Alfred nods his head enthusiastically and continues unzipping Ivan's pants. "Okay, like sucking a popsicle. That makes sense."

"I'm not food."

"Sorry, that was a dumb joke. I'll shut up now." Alfred reaches underneath the waistband of Ivan's underwear and pulls out his cock. It's half-hard, maybe because they were kissing earlier or maybe because of what Alfred said. Either way, he's more than happy to see some interest.

It makes him more confident for what he's about to do next. After checking Ivan's expression again, Alfred dips down and slowly closes his mouth over the tip.

He doesn't know what he was expecting, but it's not bad at all. It's strange to hold something warm and foreign like that in his mouth. Ivan's thick cockhead rests on his tongue, filling his

mouth in kind of a pleasant way. Alfred didn't take in much of it at first. But now that he's tried it, he feels eager to do more.

He pulls Ivan's cock out, feeling kind of red in the face, and glances up. "Let me know what you want, okay?"

Ivan nods. There's a softness to his eyes that reminds Alfred of a velvet couch. He doesn't know what he's done yet to deserve that look, but he'll try to earn it.

Now that he's licked the head of Ivan's cock, he uses the saliva to slide one hand down so he's holding the base. His mouth closes over the tip almost eagerly. Alfred kind of wanted it back in his mouth.

He's watched his fair share of porn so he's aware of what deepthroating is, but he doesn't think he can do it. And the idea of him messing up and vomiting is too much for him to even try in this situation. So he just focuses his attention on what can fit in his mouth. He bobs his head, salivating all over Ivan's erection. It probably looks disgusting, but Ivan sounds into it, and that encourages Alfred to keep going. He uses his tongue too. Anything to get more of those sounds.

"Feels good. You're so good," Ivan tells him, his voice in a rasp.

Alfred loves it when he hears that tone. It feels like such a secret voice. One that only he gets to hear. Not that he needs much encouragement after a while, because Alfred gets surprisingly into it. He didn't realize how nice a cock would feel in his mouth. How it completely distracts him from all of the hundred thoughts usually bouncing around in his head.

He almost never wants it to end. Ivan's long fingers are in his hair, combing patterns through them while he whispers his praises. All while Alfred sucks and swirls his tongue and bobs his head, trying as hard as he can, until Ivan finally comes.

It fills Alfred's mouth. He chokes on it at first, mostly from surprise, but decides to swallow it.

"Why did you do that?" Ivan stares at him with wide eyes and pink cheeks.

Alfred wipes his mouth. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"You didn't need to swallow," Ivan says, looking at him strangely, like he can't believe what he just saw. Maybe it's because Alfred's basically a virgin.

"Oh," Alfred smiles, "I mean, I didn't mind. You liked it though, right? The blowjob? Was it good?" He places his hands on Ivan's thighs and cranes up desperately for praise.

Ivan holds onto the sides of Alfred's face. "It was very good. I liked it very much," he says, leaning closer. Their noses brush as Ivan's lips move against his own. "I like you."

Why? How? Alfred doesn't get it.

But he'd be a fool not to kiss him. So he does. He captures Ivan's lips, slow at first and then harder. He stumbles to his legs, sore from being on his knees, and straddles Ivan's waist again so he can kiss him deeper.

"I like you too," Alfred says between breaths. Because he doesn't even know if he's said it yet. Ivan seems to know everything anyway.

Ivan's smile is childishly happy. "I know." He wraps his arms around Alfred's waist. "But I like it when you say it."

"I'll say it more then," Alfred grins and kisses him again.

By the time the last life drawing class rolls around, there is constant rain. The teacher wraps up the class, thanks Ivan, and asks everyone to collect their things. Alfred says goodbye to Kiku and sees Ivan standing underneath the thin cover of the roof, smoking his cigarette away from the wet.

Alfred joins him there, casually leaning into his shoulder like he's learned to do.

"I've never shown you any of my sketches from class, do you want to see them?" Alfred asks, sliding his backpack toward his chest and reaching inside.

Ivan glances at him, smiling. "Did you make me a cartoon?"

"No," Alfred scoffs. His fingers hesitate on the page. "Well, my style isn't, like, *hyperrealistic*. But I can draw from life. I think I got a lot better actually. Here." He flips open the cover and passes over the sketchbook.

Ivan keeps the cigarette between his lips as he accepts it. Alfred watches with fascination at the tiny microexpressions of Ivan's face. His eyes open marginally wider, like he's surprised, but not displeased. He flips to another page, and another.

After a bit, he shifts to holding the sketchbook with one hand and taking his cigarette with the other. "These are very good. I like them."

"You can finally admit my art is good, huh?" Alfred grins excitedly, taking the sketchbook back and putting it away. "Or do you only like my drawings when they're of you?"

Ivan throws the cigarette butt into a puddle and it fizzes out. "I never said your art was bad. I said it was funny. But I like funny things."

Alfred stares at him. "Seriously? I don't think you know how you come across. I thought you hated my art."

"I never said I hated it," Ivan replies, looking amused. He takes a step forward and wraps his hands around Alfred's waist. "I said exactly what I mean. You are the one who overthinks."

That much, Alfred knows. If there was a pill to turn off his brain, he would have already taken it. So far, sucking Ivan's dick is the only thing that actually helps. Not that he can do

that now. Probably.

Alfred carefully avoids looking down, so he doesn't betray what he wants. "And talks too much, right?"

"I like it when you talk. You have a way of surprising me, and I like that." Ivan smiles happily, kissing the corner of Alfred's mouth.

Just that innocent touch, makes Alfred squirm. He's always a little turned on after life drawing class and he still hasn't let Ivan touch him beyond kissing or occasionally roaming hands he just can't seem to stop.

But Alfred prefers making Ivan feel good. He feels better that he's useful. This hasn't improved his self-control though.

"Funny," he laughs, reddening from Ivan's embrace. "I think you're the surprising one. I literally never know what you're going to say. Like just now. That—I didn't expect that. Most people probably want me to shut up."

Ivan pulls away, eyes wide and twinkling. "How can I still be surprising when you've seen me naked? I feel like the mystery should be gone now."

As if Alfred could ever get used to seeing Ivan naked. There's just no way. Six times has pretty much seared the image in his head, but it doesn't make him any less entranced by it. Ivan could parade in front of him in the buff every day and Alfred would probably always be helpless to it.

Honestly, just hugging Ivan when he's wearing his robe, and seeing the slivers of skin peaking by his chest and his wrists and his legs—Alfred wants to undress him and touch him all over.

"I think you underestimate how good-looking you are," Alfred laughs breathlessly, tearing his gaze away from Ivan's collar bone. He catches Ivan's smile and panics. "Uh, shit. Was that weird to say? I mean, you probably already know that. Or maybe I should have told you that sooner. Because I think it all the time."

"As I said, you are always thinking too much," Ivan laughs, sliding his hand through Alfred's hair. Such a simple gesture shouldn't be so thrilling. "There is nothing weird at all about that. I think you are pretty too."

Pretty. Sure. Alfred can't help but think of the awkward, obligatory compliments he received during family holidays when he was a kid. Someone would compliment Matthew for his Christmas sweater, and then they'd turn to Alfred—much chubbier and probably chowing down on a cookie because he can't stand it when adults gossip around him—and say quickly, "Oh, you're cute too, dear. You'll grow into yourself."

Alfred likes it when his art is praised because he feels like he's earned it. He's worked hard for it. But the mountainous journey of actually becoming physically attractive just keeps

getting taller. He's not anywhere near close. Camp just proved that he'll never get there. There's never going to be an ending to it.

Ivan kisses along his cheekbone, making Alfred feel good anyway. Too good. More than he deserves. He wishes he could just suck Ivan's cock here and now to make things even between them again.

"Okay, there's no need to lie," Alfred chuckles, shivering from Ivan's touch. "I already want to makeout with you. I always do."

"I never lie."

Alfred scoffs. "Definitely a lie."

It's still raining the next week when Matthew forces Alfred to tag along with him to a house party. The semester is almost over, so he says it's a good reason to get out of the apartment. Alfred disagrees because now seems like the time more than ever to lock himself in the studio or his room and work. He has his comic draft, an essay, and a presentation to prepare for. While he can wing it when it comes to public speaking—because god knows he loves to talk about his art more than anyone—everything else requires time.

But Matthew doesn't respect Alfred's work ethic. And he basically forces Alfred into a black rain jacket and drags him down the stairs. As soon as they step outside, Alfred shivers and hurriedly zips up his jacket. It's rainy and windy. He hates this kind of weather.

The walk is not far, at least. After passing a couple of blocks, they see other students walking into a brightly-lit house.

Now that Alfred's out, he's prepared to make small talk with strangers. He's always been good at that. But when he turns to Matthew and sees him pale at the crowd.

"Dude, you okay?" Alfred asks, furrowing his brows at his brother's expression.

Matthew lets out a weak laugh. "Have I ever mentioned how much I hate parties?"

"Well, duh. Plenty of times. But you're the one who said you wanted to go!" Alfred points out, annoyed.

"I know, I know," Matthew sighs, wiping a damp strand of hair back under the cover of his hood. "But damn, there are so many people Al."

"Yeah," Alfred agrees, looking at the people through the window. "Seems kinda fun though."

"Thanks for the sympathy," Matthe snorts. He takes the first step forward. "Well, let's go inside. Sooner we go, sooner we can leave."

Alfred catches up with him quickly. "That's the spirit! Maybe you can get laid too, now."

Matthew flashes him a sly, kind of mocking smile. "I don't need your help with that."

Alfred frowns, embarrassed by his joke. Of course, Matthew doesn't need help with that. He's so popular here. He has dates all the time. Even when he enters the house and takes off his hood, there are people who come up to greet him, seeming charmed by his sweet face already.

They warm up to Alfred quickly enough. He cracks a joke and compliments some article of their clothing, or makes a comment about a poster on the wall. But it's not really the same, is it?

Eventually, he and Matthew wander to the kitchen, where there's an open bar of beverages and food.

"Are you getting something to drink?" Matthew asks, looking around the room.

Alfred shifts uncomfortably. "Uh... I dunno. I guess." He's had alcohol before, but not much and usually at home with Matthew while they're watching TV or playing video games or something. "What are you gonna have?"

"With so many options, how can I make up my mind?" Matthew laughs. He reaches into a cooler and pulls out a can. "I'll just get a beer."

Alfred finds mostly beer in the cooler. He reaches for the gold-colored can instead and turns it over in his hand. "I'll try the cider."

He cracks it open, a little curious about what it tastes like, although not really planning on drinking much. Before he takes a sip, his gaze catches on a tall silhouette with pale, fluffy hair.

Alfred's eyes widen when he realizes that's *Ivan*. He's never seen him outside of the school campus. Even their make outs and sexual escapades have always been there. He doesn't know why but whatever relationship they have seems to be confined there.

It's so strange to see him out of that context. And at a party of all things. Ivan looks ridiculously cute in his white turtleneck sweater and long beige coat splattered with raindrops. Someone talks to him and he smiles.

Alfred hates the way his heart aches seeing him smile at someone else. It's ridiculous to be possessive of something as ephemeral as a smile, but Alfred can't help it.

Matthew notices Alfred's distraction and sidles up next to him. "What is it? What are you looking at?" He glances in the same direction.

Alfred quickly blocks his view. "Wait, uh, yeah. Don't look, but Ivan just walked into the house."

Mathew's brows go up. "Ivan? Like the 'nude model that jerked you off behind the building' Ivan? Oh my god." He grins excitedly and immediately ignores Alfred's directions, craning his neck to get a better view. "I have to see this. You said he's tall, right? Shouldn't be hard to find."

Alfred panics, trying to push and pull Matthew somewhere far away. “I said don’t look! That’s just going to make this weird. We didn’t—we haven’t defined things. He’s probably not expecting to see me.”

Whatever he and Ivan have clearly isn’t, like, *serious*. Ivan’s probably here to see Gilbert or some other friend. Alfred has no clue, but he doesn’t want to break the best thing going on in his life. It seems so incredibly fragile.

Matthew gives him an unimpressed look and goes back to checking the other room. “As if he would notice me staring—*shit*.” Matthew’s cheeks color as he laughs. “He’s looking right at us.”

Alfred swings around and sees Ivan’s beautiful eyes burning a hole into his face. At once, Alfred’s stomach fills with butterflies. So happy but also so scared.

“Matt, you idiot,” Alfred rounds on him, fire spreading across his chest. “You idiot. I asked you to do one thing. One thing.”

“Shut up, already,” Matthew chides him quickly, embarrassed. “You did not tell me he was *this* tall, holy shit.”

Ivan crosses the room and stops in front of the brothers. Alfred steps forward first, plastering a big grin on his face.

“Hey, Ivan! Wow, I didn’t expect to see you here,” he says, drinking in Ivan’s face now that he’s closer. He belatedly gestures to the side. “This is my brother, Matt.”

Ivan blinks, before smiling at Matthew. “You never mentioned you had a brother. What a surprise.”

“Al gives off only child vibes, doesn’t he?” Matthew remarks flatly, looking not at all surprised that his name hasn’t come up.

“He does,” Ivan agrees. “Your name hasn’t come up once, it’s amazing.”

“Okay, enough,” Alfred interrupts, not happy with how this conversation is going. He hovers closer. “Do you want something to drink? Or—well, can you drink this stuff? I don’t even know.”

Ivan glances at the can in Alfred’s hand. “I can have cider. I will get one and meet you outside, yes? I lost my cigarette papers so I need use you.”

Use me. Alfred probably likes the sound of that more than he should.

“Oh, sure,” he swallows thickly, pushing up his glasses. “Yeah, you can use me for whatever you want. Use my cigarettes, I mean. They’re all yours.” Ivan’s expression makes him nervous, so Alfred points to the back door. “I’m—I’m going to go outside and wait for you.”

Ivan nods and goes to fetch something to drink.

Before Alfred leaves, Matthew leans into his ear and whispers, “Nicely done.” He pats Alfred’s back, laughing, and rejoins the group of people in the living room.

Alfred rushes outside as quickly as he can, the screen door slapping loudly behind him. He’s all too happy to be enveloped in the damp, wintery air this time. The drizzling rain hasn’t let up, nor has the wind. No one else is on the patio because of that. Alfred’s thankful to have a few breaths alone.

By the time Ivan steps out with a can in each hand, Alfred’s nearly collected himself.

“You got two ciders,” Alfred points out dumbly. He makes room under the cover of the roof, and Ivan huddles close to his side. The wind sprays rain on them occasionally, but not too much.

“For later.” Ivan slips one of them into one of the large pockets of his coat. “I prefer to stay outside if I can. There are far too many people inside, it makes me uncomfortable.”

How can something like a party make Ivan uncomfortable when he takes his clothes off so easily?

Alfred finds it funny. Ivan’s so contradictory, even if he doesn’t realize it.

“Yeah, it’s a pretty tight fit,” Alfred agrees, slipping into their conversational tone. “Who do you know here?”

Ivan lets out a little hum. “Only you, I think. Unless Gilbert is here too.” He huffs, like the idea is preposterous.

“Seriously? Why are you here then?”

“Because there is you.”

Alfred flushes. “Oh. Cool. Okay.”

They sip their ciders in quiet. Alfred can distantly make out Matthew’s voice through the window.

“I have been thinking about your artwork,” Ivan says after a while.

Alfred laughs. “Here we go again. Comics are a real art form. It has a whole history and everything!”

Ivan continues as if he hadn’t heard anything. “It seems very escapist to me. Your art, I mean.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that? Aren’t all stories escapist?” Alfred asks, a bit defensive.

“Not all of them. There is nothing wrong or right about it. It’s just an observation. You’re very imaginative.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“I didn’t mean it as a compliment. It’s an observation.”

“Imagination is a good thing, Ivan,” Alfred tells him. His heart pounds, because he likes talking about this sort of thing. “Thinking of the possibilities and what could be—I mean that’s the stuff stories are made of. Aliens, superheroes, detectives—all of that great stuff.”

Ivan looks up thoughtfully and doesn’t say anything at first. After he takes another drink, he tilts his head down. “Do you still want to see my art?”

Alfred hesitates. “Uh, like now?” Ivan nods, so he asks, “Do you have some photos on your phone?”

“My phone doesn’t have a camera,” Ivan laughs lightly. His hand inches closer, slowly threading his fingers with Alfred’s. Both of them are so cold.

Alfred reddens. “I get it. You’re the hardcore starving artist. Yes, I want to see your art.” It’s not like Alfred hasn’t been asking for weeks. The prospect makes him more than excited than it should. He really wants to know this part of Ivan. “Can I go to your studio then? I’ve never been to the painting department, actually.”

Ivan smiles. “How about you come to my apartment?”

Alfred’s brain glitches. “Oh. Uh. Like...”

“Right now,” Ivan continues softly, “If you’re free.”

Alfred’s vibrating in his shoes. So thrilled, but terrified too. He glances away, chewing his lip. “Well, uh... Let me say bye to my brother, at least.”

“Of course.” Ivan lets Alfred’s hand slip out of his fingers.

Alfred barely remembers the five minutes they are separated. He goes inside the house and finds Matthew, quickly whispering something rushed and awkward. Matthew’s already pink from alcohol and laughs too loudly at whatever word salad that comes out of Alfred’s mouth.

He slaps a condom into Alfred’s hand, and Alfred nearly decks him right there for being so fucking obvious. Not to mention delusional.

“I don’t need this,” he hisses, but puts it away in his pocket anyway. Mostly so no one can see it.

“Then give it to Ivan.”

Alfred’s face is on fire. “He doesn’t need it either.”

Ivan waits by the door in the meantime, awkwardly looking around with both pockets of his coat bulging with extra cider cans. He must have stolen an extra one while waiting.

Alfred ignores Matthew's comments and goes to him. They slip out the door and return to the rainy weather. Together, they walk down the sidewalk, dipping in and out of the glare of the street lamps.

Ivan steals one of Alfred's cigarettes and smokes it while they stroll. Alfred can't catch his breath enough to even try to smoke one too. It's all he can do to keep his heartbeat under control.

When they arrive at an older, very outdated looking building, Ivan tosses his cigarette away. They go up the three flights of stairs and Ivan leads him into the apartment on the left.

Ivan pauses with his key in the door. He looks down, blushing a little. "I forgot to warn you that my flat is really small."

"Well, I share an apartment with my brother, so I'm sure it's already an upgrade from that."

Turns out, it's not.

Ivan was not exaggerating. His apartment is *extremely* small. Just a studio, where the kitchenette, bedroom, and makeshift workspace are all crammed together. It's also packed with stuff. An easel with a canvas already set up. More canvases piled in a corner, along with sketchbooks and folders.

Alfred doesn't know if he's more shocked that Ivan lives here or that he apparently works here too.

Ivan picks up some clothes from the floor and creates a path for Alfred. The clothes get tossed on top of a hamper that's already full. Ivan puts the ciders away in the fridge and takes off his coat. He hangs it on the door. His cheeks are a little pinker, either from the embarrassment or the exertion.

Alfred turns to the canvas on the easel. It looks half-finished. Or maybe it's not. Just like Alfred initially thought, Ivan does abstract art. So Alfred can't really make heads or tails of what he's looking at.

"What do you think? Your opinion interests me," Ivan asks, stopping next to him.

Alfred rubs the back of his neck. "It's...well, it's not really what I expected. I don't know much about modern art. I like the colors, though?"

"You don't like it," Ivan laughs, actually sounding delighted to hear it. "I thought as much."

"I didn't say I didn't like it! I just—well, maybe I'm not smart enough to get it. Explain it to me. I want to hear."

Ivan's smile is small, but pleased. "If you like." He trails off about the meaning, pointing to different parts of the canvas and telling Alfred what he was thinking. He adds afterwards, "To be honest, I don't think I have much talent."

Alfred stares at him, appalled. “What? Don’t say that. Of course, you’re talented.” Someone as incredible and interesting and Ivan can only be talented. Alfred sees the whole universe in him.

“No, I don’t think so. Not every one is. There is not very much that I am good at,” Ivan admits, shrugging his shoulders. “Perhaps I am also too lazy to try very hard. I’ve always been like that.”

Alfred goes quiet as he processes this. Something clicks into place. “You don’t really,” he starts awkwardly, “I mean, I’ve noticed that you don’t seem to like yourself very much.”

“Really?” Ivan blinks, glancing at him innocently. “Well, I suppose that is true.”

“It makes me sad. I like you. I, uh, I like you and your art.”

“I like you too.”

Alfred blushes. “Oh, cool.”

Fuck. Can’t he think of something better to say, just this once? Why does his brain fail him at the most important moments?

Ivan seems unbothered. He moves to the corner of the apartment and picks up a sketchbook. When he turns, his smile is sly. “Can I draw you?”

“What? Now? Here?” Alfred looks around wildly. He’s never posed for a portrait ever. He’s always made Matthew sit for him when he needed a model in high school.

“Yes, of course. I already have my supplies here.” Ivan picks up a pencil bag and opens it to inspect the contents. He takes it to the tiny table adjacent to the kitchenette and sits down on the single chair.

Alfred remains standing, fidgeting from foot to foot.

Is he supposed to just stand? His gaze hesitantly wanders to the full-sized bed. He’d been trying to avoid it this entire time. But it’s the only other place he can actually sit, so Ivan must mean for him to sit there.

“No offense, Ivan. But your apartment is the size of a shoebox,” Alfred laughs, adjusting his glasses nervously. “Isn’t this going to be awkward?”

Ivan is already taking a pencil out and resting the end of the sketchbook against his thighs. He looks expectantly at Alfred.

Alfred licks his lips. After another moment of deliberation, he goes to Ivan’s bed—the one neat place in the entire flat—and sits down at the very edge of the covers. He turns to Ivan and waits for some sort of instruction on how to pose.

Ivan presses the end of the pencil against the center of his lower lip, looking thoughtful. His eyes twinkle with a new idea. “Do you want to take your clothes off too?”

Alfred jumps to his feet. “No,” he says immediately. “I mean, uh, no,” he amends, trying to sound more reasonable. “You mean like what you do? No... I don’t know. You’re a professional. I thought you just wanted to draw my face or something. I—I can take my glasses off. But that’s as naked as I’m going to get. Sorry.” Alfred removes his spectacles like some sort of peace offering and hopes that will do the trick.

“You’ve seen me naked,” Ivan points out, smiling a little more.

“Because it was a class! And—and you have a nice body! Like I said, you’re a professional.”

“Ah, I see,” Ivan sighs, tapping his pencil against the page. His smile pulls to the side. “If you undress, I can suck your cock afterwards. How about that?”

Oh god. Alfred wishes he weren’t so obvious, but he stares at Ivan’s lips while the idea plays through his head. It would feel amazing. He already knows. Probably too good. If he came so easily from a handjob, then he can only imagine how long he’d last getting head.

“Well, I...if you let me suck *your* cock, then I’ll do it,” he mutters, knowing full well how red his ears are. “Just for a little while I guess.” Alfred puts his glasses back on and pulls his rain jacket off first.

“You’re quite horny, aren’t you?”

Alfred scoffs. “I’m not the one who demanded a handjob behind the drawing building.” He reaches underneath the hem of his long-sleeved shirt and sees Ivan staring at him expectantly. “Stop watching me undress, it’s weirding me out.”

“Really? This part embarrasses you?” Ivan chuckles, not bothering to look away.

Alfred turns his back to him, too anxious to say anything more. He pulls off the rest of his clothing as fast as he can. Shoes and socks first. Then stumbling awkwardly out of his jeans because they got wet in the rain and clung to his legs when he tried stepping out of them. He considers taking off his boxers, but decides against it. He’s naked enough.

He turns around and carefully avoids looking at Ivan’s face. “How do you want me to pose?”

“You can choose.”

Alfred glowers at the floor, not happy about the lack of instruction. He sits at the edge of the bed again.

But he finds it a strange way to sit now that he’s mostly naked and ends up scooting back against the headboard so at least he can rest his back against something. He brings one knee to his chest and looks up.

“What?” Alfred flushes. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“I have to look at you,” Ivan points out calmly, his gaze roaming slowly over Alfred’s body.

“Oh. Right.” Alfred feels stupid for being so anxious. His fingers scrunch the duvet underneath. He tries not to think about the fact that Ivan sleeps here. Maybe has sex here. “Then, uh, just start already. I’m uncomfortable.”

“I can tell. There is no reason to be though.”

Alfred stupidly hopes that Ivan is going to say he looks beautiful or something girly like that. He doesn’t even know where such a desire sprang from. That’s not what he hears.

“You’re not the first naked person I’ve looked at,” Ivan says as he starts sketching.

“Right,” Alfred agrees shortly, completely ignoring the voice in his head that wants to point out Ivan is the first naked man he’s seen.

“Stop chewing your cheek,” Ivan orders firmly. “Face this way. Very good.” He smiles at Alfred’s obedience and goes back to work. “Stay there.”

Alfred realizes that modeling is a lot harder than Ivan makes it look. He doesn’t know if he’s ever sat so still before. He doesn’t know if he’s tried. Alfred likes to do things. His brain is so busy that when he’s not occupied with something, it’s like he’s going to explode.

He fingers the duvet a lot, and fidgets with the frame of his glasses. When he runs out of things to do, he ends up meeting Ivan’s gaze. Vibrantly violet, sparkling with intent that Alfred hasn’t seen before.

Maybe Ivan is even more attractive when he’s drawing. Alfred kind of likes this expression on him.

“I have a confession to make,” Alfred prompts after a bit.

“Yes?” Ivan doesn’t stop his work.

“I only started smoking so I could talk to you,” Alfred laughs at his story. “I—well, you were always smoking with Gilbert and I wasn’t sure how to approach you guys. So, I bought I pack of cigarettes. Pretty stupid, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Ivan agrees with a smile.

Alfred bites down on his lips and tries not to think of sucking Ivan’s cock. “I kind of want a cigarette now. I guess that’s why I brought it up.”

“You’re addicted. I’m flattered,” Ivan says. He makes a few more marks on the paper, and glances up. “I noticed you before.”

“You did?”

“You’re quite intimidating,” Ivan admits.

Alfred nearly falls over. “*ME?* Intimidating? Holy shit.” He doesn’t know if he’s more surprised or pleased. Both. Definitely both. “No way. I don’t think anyone’s ever said that

about me before. I thought you were intimidating. I mean, you kind of are.”

Ivan chuckles. “Well, once you started talking to me, I realized you’re quite soft underneath that shell of yours.”

Soft. Alfred squirms, unsure if he likes that word applied to him.

His belly tightens anyway, because there’s something intimate about it that excites him. Even if it probably shouldn’t.

“Y’know, you’re kind of the opposite,” Alfred points out slowly. “You seem so nice and happy, but you’re pretty hard inside.” He blushes, realizing that’s probably rude as hell. He still hasn’t learned how to shut his mouth.

“So you can see reality sometimes,” Ivan sounds genuinely amused. “And here, I thought there were just cartoons playing in your head.”

“Shut up. I like cartoons.”

“I know.”

Minutes pass with only a few comments here and there. Alfred starts getting antsy being in the same position for so long. His legs are stiff. He wants to stand up and move. He wants to go over to Ivan and kiss him. He wants to put his clothes back on and hide.

Alfred tries distracting himself by looking around the room. But nothing is more interesting than Ivan, so Alfred ends up turning back each time. He looks at Ivan’s hands, large with long fingers, but holding the pencil so confidently.

He looks at Ivan’s thick thighs, still covered by the pair of dark pants. Alfred imagines them squeezing him. Surrounding him. He’s never had this idea before, but it happens so naturally in his mind. Alfred already has every inch of Ivan memorized, he can easily imagine what it would look like. He just doesn’t know how it’d feel.

He wants to suck Ivan’s cock again.

“Alfred,” Ivan breaks the silence, “Your gaze is making me blush.” He’s looking at his sketchbook with pink cheeks, lips curled in a smile.

Alfred jolts out of his trance. “What?”

His breath quickens as he notices Ivan’s expression. Alfred feels even hotter than before.

“I’m the one who’s posing naked,” he defends himself quickly. “I should be saying that! You’re the one looking at me with those ‘artist eyes’.”

“That’s different,” Ivan says, resting one arm over the top of his sketchbook. “I don’t think you realize how hungry your eyes are. I have a hard time when you stare at me like that.”

Alfred’s jaw closes with a click. He—*really?*

“It’s how you look at me in the life drawing class too. Most people do not even remember me when that class is over, but you are very unusual.” Ivan’s dark eyes catch the light. “You look at me like you’re *starving*.”

Alfred goes very still, body rocking only by the pounding of his heart.

He’s had maybe three black coffees today. Half of a donut from the corner market. Two cans of Diet Coke. At least ten cigarettes. Cheese fries that he shared with Ivan at lunch. Two protein bars. And half a can of cider.

Alfred *is* hungry. He’s always so hungry. For food. For attention. For success. For love. For Ivan maybe most of all right now. He didn’t realize it was written on his face. Or is Ivan the only one who can see it?

“Are you,” Alfred licks his lips, “Are you done drawing yet?”

Ivan lifts his lashes. “Not even close.”

God, this guy. He really—

Alfred swallows his frustration. “Well, can you be done *now*?” He doesn’t need to look down to know that his cock is half-hard in his boxers. His skin is burning to be touched. And he can’t stop thinking about Ivan’s plush lips. His large hands. His pale hair.

“Why would I want to do that?” Ivan asks innocently. His gaze flits to Alfred’s crotch and back fleetingly, but expression doesn’t change. “You look perfect as you are.”

“You drive me crazy!” Alfred’s hands clench into fists. He jumps off the bed and crosses the room. As soon as he’s in front of Ivan, he drops to his knees. “C’mon. I’m already here. Let me—let me blow you already. Please. You promised that I could.”

“I didn’t promise anything. And I definitely did not promise *that*,” Ivan laughs, depositing his sketchbook and pencil on the table.

“I know you want me to,” Alfred says hopefully. He preens when Ivan starts raking his fingers through his hair. “I’m good at it, aren’t I?”

“You are. You’re very good. It makes you happy to suck my cock and not think about anything else, doesn’t it?”

“Well, yeah,” Alfred admits, reddening. “Kinda.”

Ivan smiles sweetly. “Too bad.”

“Huh. Wait a minute—Ivan!”

Alfred is yanked to his feet so easily, the room spins. He didn’t even know Ivan could do that. He’s never so much as tried to manhandle Alfred like that.

Then, before Alfred can form a coherent word, he's walked backwards—pushed, really—until he's tipped over the edge of the bed and falling flat on his back. Ivan follows, crawling between Alfred's legs.

"I'm tired of not touching you. It's my turn now," Ivan says, thumbing underneath the waistband of Alfred's boxers and slowly dragging them down.

Alfred's erection springs free, red and hard against the rest of him. He suppresses the prudish urge to cover it, even though he wants to. Ivan's actually going to blow him?

God, he won't even last a minute.

"But it's embarrassing! I can't—damn it," Alfred splutters, watching his boxers get tossed to the floor. "I have no self-control. I don't like looking like that around you."

Ivan's hands slide up his legs, stopping at his kneecaps. *Fuck*. Even there's sensitive. Alfred's breath is ragged just trying to anticipate where Ivan's fingers will go next.

"That's a problem, because I like it very much," Ivan hums as he drags his lips down Alfred's inner thigh, leaving the skin sparkling with his saliva. "You look at me like you want to eat me. How do you think I look at you?"

Alfred clutches the sheets, trying to get ahold of his breathing. Of his heartbeat. He already gave up on the pathetically thin thread of his self-control. That snapped as soon as Ivan touched him.

"I dunno. Like you're—I dunno. You're hard to read, Ivan! I don't think I ever know what you're thinking."

"I want to fuck you."

Alfred's eyes widen. He can't believe those words actually came out of Ivan's mouth. It sounds so wrong. But in a good way. The kind of way that makes Alfred's whole body light up.

"Oh. Like, now?" he chokes, feeling Ivan's hands roam down his inner thighs. So *close*. "I mean, of course, now. But you've been thinking that for a while?"

"Since you ran into me."

"Huh? Why then?"

Ivan stops groping him and considering this. Then his gaze darkens in that evil way Alfred's only seen a few times. "There's something kind of cute about how you try to seem put together. It makes me want to take you apart."

Alfred's laugh sounds strangled. "Jesus, if I didn't know you that would be a terrifying thing to hear."

"You like it."

“Well, yeah,” Alfred swallows, “It’s kind of hot.”

“So you’ll let me?” Ivan asks, already lowering his head down to Alfred’s erection.

God—just the *sight* of Alfred’s cockhead pressing against Ivan’s cheek. Alfred can’t even process it. How does Ivan look both so innocent and so slutty doing something like that? Even his soft features contradict his strange personality. Alfred's going to overheat.

“You know I won’t last very long. It’s hard. For me. I’m not used to this,” Alfred continues quickly, losing his voice when Ivan licks up the length of his cock quickly. “And you’re so—I get excited when you even hold my hand.”

“You’re adorable,” Ivan giggles, flashing his teeth. “I want to fuck you even more now. But first, I’ll take care of this.”

He parts his lips and closes his mouth over Alfred’s cock.

The sensation is overwhelming. Alfred’s cock is enclosed in the tight, wet heat of Ivan’s mouth. He’s never felt anything so incredible. His head falls back on the bed, eyes wide, and he drags the sheets into his palm.

“Fuck! Fuck, Ivan!” he exclaims, trying as hard as he can to not come. But it’s hard. It’s so fucking hard. He’s not even looking at Ivan because he knows the sight would probably send him over the edge.

Just feeling Ivan push Alfred’s cock deeper into his mouth, in his throat—far deeper than Alfred ever took him. The sounds are just as electrifying. They’re downright dirty, actually. Alfred hears him bob his head, drooling on his cock to make it even better.

It’s so perverted. It’s so good. Alfred’s surprised he’s even lasted a minute. He wonders if he can make it to five. But Ivan’s not playing fair. He uses his tongue to swirl over the tip, and Alfred chokes on more expletives.

The final straw is when Ivan cups his balls. Alfred comes so hard and he shouts. Grabbing the bed as all of his muscles go taut and his vision whites out with the most pleasure he’s ever felt.

When he’s panting, slowly unclenching his fingers from the sheets, he sees Ivan wiping his mouth above him. He looks angelic even with his lips sinfully shiny and red.

“I knew you’d like that,” he teases.

Alfred fixes his glasses, which had gone crooked on his nose. “I’m sorry. Fuck, I don’t know why I’m like this. It’s pathetic.” Alfred’s babbling is stopped when Ivan presses him down with a hard kiss to his mouth.

“Why is it pathetic?” Ivan asks smoothly. He reaches underneath the bed and produces a bottle of lube and a condom. “I’ll make you come again very soon.”

Alfred inhales sharply, grin going wobbly. “Seriously, man. You gotta stop saying these things as threats. It’s too sexy.”

He starts to get some feeling back in his legs as he watches Ivan coat his fingers in lube and the implication of what’s happening next really sinks in.

Ivan folds one of Alfred’s legs down, and creates more space for himself between them. Alfred just lets him, too curious and excited by what he’s doing. Ivan seems so at ease with all of this. It makes wonder how experienced he really is. Of course, looking like he does, he’s probably had sex with tons of people. Alfred’s just one of the many.

That depressing thought flies away when Ivan circles his finger around Alfred’s entrance.

Fuck. Alfred’s never even thought of his hole like an *entrance* before now, but that’s what it’s going to be, isn’t it? He’s watched enough porn to know.

He swallows thickly and looks up at Ivan with wide eyes.

Ivan smiles knowingly, his finger continuing its circular motions around the ring of muscle. “Have you ever put anything up here before?”

“Do you have to ask that?” Alfred breathes. Does he actually have to admit the weird things he’s done in high school when he was horny and desperate?

“I was only curious,” Ivan supplies, but the twinkle in his eyes makes it seem like he’s happy with whatever answer he sees on Alfred’s face. Ivan slowly sinks in one finger, wriggling it around until it’s lodged inside of Alfred. “How is it?”

“Fine,” Alfred says quietly. He looks away, embarrassed. “Weird. But, uh, fine.” He decides to take off his glasses and put them on the small nightstand so they’re out of the way.

Ivan plunges two fingers into him next. The difference is noticeable. Alfred makes a noise of surprise. It doesn’t hurt, but like before—it’s strange. He doesn’t really know what to make of it. He can’t really describe it as good or bad. The biggest turn on for him is the fact that Ivan is doing it and seems to be very interested in doing it too.

Alfred licks his lips distractedly, as Ivan starts inserting them inside and out. Loosening him up. The sound of lube is disturbing. Alfred pretends he can’t hear it.

“And now?” Ivan asks, as he’s doing his task.

“I’d rather not talk while you do this.”

“Now, you don’t want to talk. I see.” Ivan rolls his eyes. He crooks his fingers deep inside of Alfred and presses down.

Oh. Alfred doesn’t know if he’s ever reached there before. He didn’t even know that spot existed inside of him. He grabs whatever he can hold—the duvet, the sheets—and moans.

“Shit! There—!” Alfred’s eyes are wide behind the glasses. He already came, but his body is starting to wake up again. He wants more. He really wants more.

“You like it?” Ivan asks, even as he does it again. Pressing down on Alfred’s prostate, almost massaging it with his strokes.

Alfred writhes on the bed, unable to control himself. His flailing hands end up wrapping around Ivan’s forearm at some point. Just holding him—not pulling or pushing in anyway. Alfred doesn’t know what he wants to do. It’s just...

“Fuck—Ivan!” he exclaims, inhaling sharply. Ivan’s not letting up. He seems to like punishing Alfred this way. Fingering him into hardness again. Alfred clearly doesn’t hate it, but he can’t shut up about it. “Too much! Too—!”

Ivan laughs happily as he works. “You really are sensitive. Have you always been like this? Or is it just because of me?” His fingers slip out, leaving Alfred empty and weirdly open.

Alfred doesn’t want to think about he looks down there.

Fuck. He really doesn’t.

“I don’t—I mean, how the fuck would I know? It sucks.” Alfred pants, relieved for a break from the fingering but also a little dissatisfied. His gaze follows Ivan’s hands lazily as they reach for something else.

“It’s not a bad thing to feel good,” Ivan tells him calmly. “I like seeing you like that.”

Oh. For someone with no tact, Ivan is shockingly good at choosing the right things to say at the most important moment.

Alfred blushes a shade darker, and gets a little more comfortable on the bed because he’s starting to like being attended to if this is the kind of treatment he gets.

“Okay,” he says under his breath.

Ivan starts pulling off his clothing now. Slipping out of his sweater first and then standing up from the bed to remove his pants and briefs. He crawls back naked, pale, and beautiful. His blue-purple eyes already brightening with another idea.

“Can we try something more now?” Ivan asks, smiling, as he tears open the condom wrapper.

“Your dick?” Alfred blurts out the obvious. It’s erect and pink and looking so delicious Alfred could swallow it whole. He pushes himself up on his elbows hopefully. “Oh, you’re hard already. I wanted to blow you.”

Ivan nudges him back down. “Maybe later. Do you want to be on your back or stomach?”

Alfred clenches his teeth. His eyes flip rapidly between Ivan rolling the condom on his cock and the way his own legs are spread apart. It looks fucking obscene. Alfred doesn’t even

believe this is happening to him. And Ivan actually wants to do this? He's absolutely nuts.

"Back is fine," Alfred wheezes. "Like this, I mean. It's fine."

Ivan's smile pulls to the side and he spreads Alfred's thighs wide on the bed. "I really feel like I'm deflowering you this way."

"Well, you are. Kind of," Alfred says awkwardly. "I mean, I don't have a vagina so obviously not the same. Like I'm not going to bleed unless your dick is too big or my asshole's too small or something. Fuck, I hope I don't bleed. Does that happen a lot? Never mind. Uh, don't answer that. I'm better off not knowing." What is he even saying? *Shut up, shut up, shut up.* Alfred can't stop himself though. "But I've never done this before, so..."

I trust you. I like you. Maybe I even love you, but it feels too soon to say that.

Ivan's gaze softens to that velvety purple again. Oh, god, how Alfred wishes he could just curl up in that color.

"I know," Ivan says, kindly. "Try to relax."

His thumbs pull Alfred's asscheeks apart, and he nudges his cock against Alfred's slicked up hole. It bumps against it, and Alfred clenches just anticipating it.

He wants Ivan inside of him. He's also kinda scared. But he mostly wants it. It helps that he can actually see how much Ivan wants him too.

"Sure, easy for you to say," Alfred mutters, voice going high as Ivan pushes his cockhead inside. Alfred's arms go out and grab onto whatever he can hold. "Oh—oh, fuck. It's—you're—*fuck!*"

The fingers didn't prepare him enough. Ivan's dick is bigger. And the girth stings as Alfred takes it. He can actually feel his body opening up to accommodate him and it's the weirdest fucking feeling.

Suddenly, Ivan is *inside* of him. His dick inched its way through, spearing him open. It's so big, but after Alfred adjusts it's not really bad at all. It's kind of—well, he doesn't know what to make of it yet. He looks up with wide, uncomprehending eyes and sees Ivan staring down at him.

"You're tight," Ivan mutters, hands wrapping around Alfred's thighs and keeping them down.

"I can't believe it actually fit. Jesus. It feels," Alfred stops, cringing at himself. Can he not sound like a dipshit for just one moment? "It's... uh, never mind. I'm going to say something dumb if I keep talking."

Ivan smiles, eyes hooded. "You're so cute. I like you like this." His hand clench around Alfred's thighs as he snaps his hips forward.

Alfred moans. Oh. He did not expect *this*. Being filled by Ivan's cock was stimulating enough, but having it actually move inside of him? Alfred can't keep his mouth closed apparently.

"Oh, fuck. Ivan," he groans, reaching behind to grab the sheets.

Ivan slowly thrusts into him, his cock grazing all of the sensitive parts inside of Alfred. The pain from before slowly fades and is replaced by pleasure. Alfred didn't expect it to feel good. He likes it. He loves it.

He finds himself missing Ivan's cock each time it pulls out and moaning when it pushes in. Apparently it didn't take much for Alfred to become used to this. Maybe he just has a weak spot for Ivan's cock. He liked it in his mouth well enough, but now that it's fucking his ass—

Alfred groans at his own perversion. He doesn't know if there's a single coherent thought still in his brain. He's focusing on Ivan's fingers on his feverish skin, Ivan's gaze trained on his face. Alfred wants to kiss him so badly.

"See you can last longer when you try," Ivan teases.

"That's because I already came," Alfred says, breathless. His stomach clenches when Ivan stabs his prostate again. Too much! His cock is hard and leaking pre-come. "But—already—fuck, I'm hard again. From this."

"Yes, it's very slutty of you," Ivan agrees.

"I'm not," Alfred protests hotly. He's not slutty at all. How can a virgin be slutty? But then Ivan pounds him again and his back arches. "Oh—there! More. So good. So fucking good —!"

His hands scramble around Ivan's back and drag him down. He sighs under the delicious, heavy weight of Ivan's body. God, it's so good. It's even better being fucked like this. Alfred wants to be surrounded by him. Suffocated by him.

"Ivan!" he screams, his body going tight around Ivan's cock as he comes.

Ivan slows his pace for a moment, letting Alfred ride through the orgasm and casually glancing at the come that lands on Alfred's stomach.

Alfred's barely aware enough to realize it yet but—*fucking hell*. Did he just come without his cock being touched? How awful is he? Alfred should be more embarrassed than he is. But his body feels so loose and relaxed. It lets itself be guided into a new position, folded onto his side, as Ivan seeks his own release.

Ivan wraps one arm around Alfred's middle and presses his nose close to Alfred's ear. "Good job," he praises huskily. "Now you just have to relax while I finish."

"I can do that," Alfred chuckles lazily, his tongue heavy. "I kind of like this actually."

Ivan uses his boneless body as he likes. Holding him down as his thrusts become faster, more desperate. Alfred's oversensitive, it feels strange to be used again so quickly. But he doesn't dislike it. Not when he has Ivan's quiet groans in his ear. Those tiny whispers of evidence that Ivan's enjoying it at least half as much as he does and proof that Alfred's being useful.

Ivan comes when he intertwines his fingers with Alfred's and thrusts his cock deep inside, coming into the condom.

"Alfred," Ivan moans. He searches blindly for Alfred's lips and Alfred meets him halfway.

Sparks fly through him, so happy that Ivan feels good too.

Eventually, Ivan pulls out, leaving Alfred weirdly empty and used. His hole clenches around nothing, and he hears Ivan tie the condom off and deposit it somewhere else.

When Ivan returns, Alfred latches onto him with all of his limbs so they're snuggled on the bed. His face presses against one of Ivan's pecks.

"Wow, that was amazing," Alfred gushes, cheeks warm. He picks up his glasses from the nightstand and looks up at Ivan to check his expression. "I think I might like that as much as sucking your dick."

Ivan's smile is soft and fond. "See, you are slutty. I was right," he says, kissing Alfred's temple. They go back to cuddling on the bed. But Alfred can't really stay still.

One of his legs is wrapped around Ivan's body, and he can feel Ivan's flaccid cock laying against him. Alfred wants to suck it. He wants to—oh fuck—Alfred can't stop his imagination from running off with him.

"Alfred, you're looking at me like that again," Ivan breaks the silence, his tone curious. "What are you thinking?"

After sucking his lip, Alfred looks up hopefully. "Do you think we can do it again soon?" He rolls Ivan onto his back so he can lay on top of him, arms spread on either side of Ivan's face. Fuck, he looks so beautiful. Ivan's dusted pink cheeks, shiny eyes, and pale hair. Alfred wishes he could drink him in. "Or I can fuck you? Or suck your dick. Whatever you want. Just—" *I want you*. One time isn't enough. Five times won't be enough either. Alfred really is starving.

Ivan breaks into laughter. His hands coming around Alfred so he can hold him close and pepper kisses against his jaw. "I knew you were insatiable," he teases, elated.

Alfred grins, happiness spreading down to his toes. For once he doesn't have to deny himself anything. He leans down and claims Ivan's lips, ready to embrace him again.

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